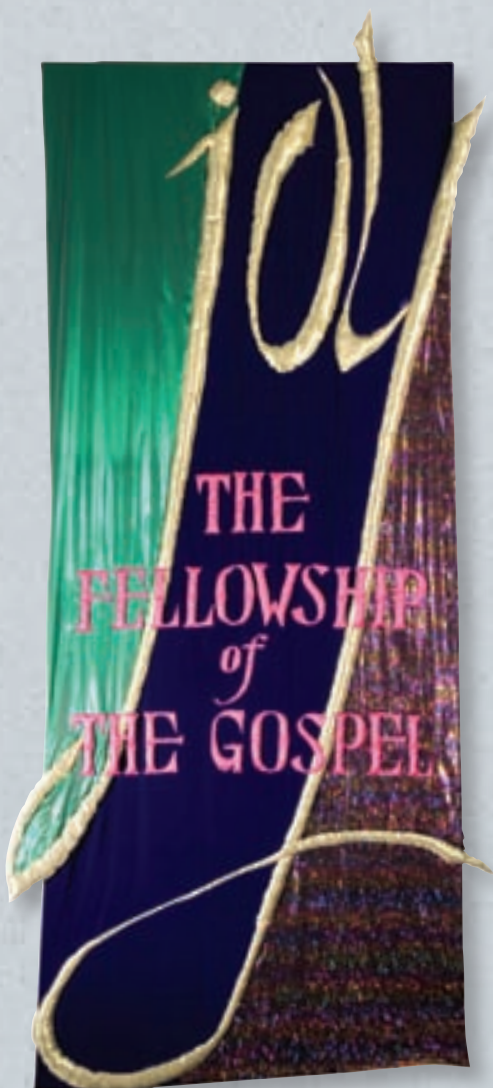


P R E A C H I N G T H E W O R D

PHILIPPIANS



THE
FELLOWSHIP
OF THE
GOSPEL

R. Kent
Hughes

PHILIPPIANS

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P R E A C H I N G T H E W O R D

PHILIPPIANS

The Fellowship of the Gospel

R. Kent Hughes

R. Kent Hughes, General Editor

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

For Barbara,
*my best friend and lifelong comrade in the
Fellowship of the Gospel*

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi,
with the overseers and deacons:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:1, 2

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Acknowledgments

This is my thirteenth contribution to the Preaching the Word commentary series. And over the years I have become increasingly aware of how much I owe to those who have supported my work. My talented administrative assistants have been, respectively, Mrs. Lillian Smith, Mrs. Sharon Fritz, and Mrs. Pauline Epps — all very competent and committed to improving the shape and substance of my work. Mr. Herbert Carlburg has had his hand in every volume, checking all references and correcting my grammar. And then, of course, I have had the deft and wise services of Crossway's senior editor Ted Griffin, whose theological acumen has sharpened my expression of important truths.

Lastly, any preacher knows that the congregation adds to or detracts from the pulpit ministry. And happily, in my case, the people of College Church have vastly contributed to this volume by their expectations, criticisms, suggestions, and prayers — for which I am so grateful.

Now, in respect to this volume, special thanks to Pauline, Herb, Ted, and my wife, Barbara, for their singular contributions.

A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary — through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it — the Holy Spirit filling one's sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one's hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos* — in terms of preaching, God's Word. This means that as we stand before God's people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is — so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God's Word, but God's actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God's smile in preaching is *ethos* — what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the

truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our *ethos* as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos* — personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile — the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1, 2)

1

A Particular Joy

PHILIPPIANS 1:1, 2

This is admittedly subjective, but it seems to me that the four chapters of Philippians have provided more favorite quotes and sound bites than any other section of Scripture of similar length — certainly it has done that for me. Here are some of my favorites:

- “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (1:21)
- “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” (1:23)
- “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” (1:27)
- “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others.” (2:3, 4)
- “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:5-10)
- “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (2:12, 13)
- “. . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ.” (3:8, 9)

• “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (3:13, 14)

• “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (3:20)

• “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” (4:4)

• “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:6, 7)

• “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . .” (4:8)

• “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” (4:11)

• “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:13)

You can see that I love this book. But there is a danger in knowing these lines so well: they can take on a life of their own apart from their context and become sentimentalized and emptied of their depth.¹ For example, “Rejoice in the Lord always” has become for some within the church and outside it a motto for merely willing a superficial happiness, rather than the deep theologically grounded command that it is.

As a matter of fact, *Philippians* is not (as is commonly thought) “The Epistle of Joy.” But joy is a motif in *Philippians*, and when it flashes forth, as it does sixteen times, it is sparked by the deeper themes of Paul’s letter. *Philippians* calls us to a particular joy, the joy experienced by Paul in Roman captivity facing a capital charge while his leadership was being contested by usurpers within the church. So as we journey through *Philippians* it is my hope that these favorite verses and other familiar lines of this amazing letter will take on their first-century depth and power.

PAUL’S JOURNEY TO PHILIPPI

The background of *Philippians* is this: Paul and Barnabas had returned victoriously from the famous Council in Jerusalem, with the Council’s decisive ruling that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or adopt Jewish customs to be saved. It was a watershed ruling. Gentile evangelism was given a mighty liberating boost. But then Paul and Barnabas separated, and Paul took Silas and set out on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 15:36-40). Timothy joined them in Lystra (cf. Acts 16:1-5).

Paul’s plan was to retrace the steps of his first missionary journey and encourage the churches. As they traveled west, the trio attempted to go back down to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit checked them. Then they tried to go north to Bithynia by the Black Sea, and again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow it (cf. Acts 16:6, 7). Thus, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were effectively funneled west to Troas and the mouth of the Dardanelle Straits,

the gateway to Europe. There Dr. Luke joined them, forming a dynamic foursome.

It was there at the Dardanelles that Paul beheld standing before him in a night vision a man from Macedonia (a European from what today is northern Greece), urging him and saying, as Luke tells it, “‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9, 10). In an instant came one of the great turning points in history as Paul and company made a two-day crossing to Neapolis and walked nine miles along the Egnatian Way to Philippi. Rome did not know it, but the flag of Christianity was unfurled in the Empire that day.

Philippi was not a big city, no more than 10,000 at the most, and rested on a narrow shoulder of land, crowned by an acropolis guarding the *Via Egnatia*, the famous highway between Rome and her eastern empire. Philippi had been founded by Greeks in the fourth century B.C. Phillip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, had named it after himself.²

But now it was a Roman colony because in 42 B.C. Philippi achieved note as the place where Mark Anthony and Octavian (Augustus) fought the forces of Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, defeating Cassius. Later in 31 B.C. when Augustus defeated Mark Antony in the battle of Actium, Augustus renamed the colony after himself — *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis*.³ As a Roman town it was governed by Roman law. Roman expatriates made up the citizenry. Latin became the official language, and the citizens wore Roman dress. The public inscriptions in the forum and on all the buildings were exclusively Latin. So the leadership and aristocracy of Philippi were completely Roman and Latin. This naturally created a Greek-speaking underclass that made up the local populace. These were the construction workers and tradesmen and merchants.⁴ It is to this social group that Paul initially came.

Paul’s custom when entering a town was to go first to the Jews, to the synagogue (cf. Acts 14:1). But there were so few Jews in the city that the necessary quorum to form a synagogue of ten men did not exist.⁵ However, after a few days Paul did discover a Sabbath congregation meeting alongside a river outside the city walls. It was a group of God-fearing Gentile women meeting in “a place of prayer” (16:13). Today there is a general agreement that the exact site of that “place of prayer” was just outside the southern gate at the bank of the Gangites River, which still flows only fifty meters from the old city wall.⁶ That was likely where Paul and Silas made initial contact with Gentile women worshipping the God of Israel — women who would soon become the first Christians of Philippi.

PAUL'S RECEPTION IN PHILIPPI

The first of these women was a merchant named Lydia. As Luke tells it, “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The man in the Macedonian vision turned out to be a woman! Lydia believed, her entire household believed, and they were all baptized on the spot in the Gangites (v. 15).

Spiritual opposition was almost immediate in the form of a girl who had “a spirit of divination” (v. 16; literally “a pythonic spirit,” referencing demonic control). The girl’s loud, incessant heralding of the truth about Paul and company — ““These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation”” (v. 17) — was a demonic attempt to co-opt the gospel and destroy it. Paul exorcised the spirit on the spot — and found himself in deep trouble because he had driven out the girl’s owners’ source of income! Paul and Silas were seized and were taken to the “Roman” magistrates, were identified as “Jews” (appealing to the Romanness of the officials and their anti-Semitic prejudices), and were savagely beaten by the *lictors* — they got their licks!

We all know the story. As the bruised and bleeding duo sat in stocks in the bowels of the prison and sang songs in the night, “hymns to God” (v. 25), a great earthquake freed them from their stocks and opened the prison doors. And the gospel further invaded Europe when the jailer cried out, “‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (vv. 30, 31). Then came another round of baptisms!

When the magistrates learned that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, their arrogance turned to quaking fear and profuse apologies as they urged them to quietly leave town. They did leave, but not before visiting Lydia. There were undoubtedly tears and maybe even some laughter and hoots in Lydia’s home. Possibly they sang a few “prison songs.” Certainly there was praise and thanksgiving to God and prayers for the new church — Lydia and her household, the jailer and his household, perhaps other God-fearing women from the riverbank, maybe even the ex-pythoness. The flag of the gospel had been raised on a new continent. We should take note in this day of the science of church growth and the promotion of the homogeneous unit principle that this was not a homogeneous church plant but rather the body of Christ in glorious diversity.

It is important to understand here that the church in Philippi would become Paul’s favorite church.⁷ Paul enjoyed a unique closeness to the Philippians, which we see in exceptionally warm and friendly expressions in this letter. Paul makes this clear right after his greeting as he says, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine

for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (vv. 3-5). The word “partnership” is the Greek word *koinonia*, “fellowship” — Paul feels a warm “fellowship in the gospel” with the Philippians. As we will see in our next study, the same word (fellowship, partnership) or its derivatives appears six times in Philippians (cf. 1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10; 4:14, 15 [twice]). And we shall see that this is not a church social fellowship as Christians today often think of the word, but a robust fellowship that rides on their mutual commitment to the gospel. This gospel fellowship grew from their commitment to support Paul’s mission spiritually and materially (cf. 4:15, 16).

What we must understand as we go through Philippians is that while there are various reasons for Paul’s writing, this letter comes from the depth of fellowship that Paul and the Philippians shared in the gospel. This accounts for the feel of this letter and is the basis for what Paul said to the Philippians and how he said it.

This is why this book has the subtitle “The Fellowship of the Gospel” — it is an epic fellowship as suggested by Tolkien’s title *The Fellowship of the Ring*. No punch and cookies here. This is the fellowship of compatriots bound together in a great cause. You will not understand the letter if you do not understand this.

PAUL’S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS (vv. 1, 2)

The occasion for Paul’s letter to the Philippians came years after the founding of the church and sprang from their financial support of him as a prisoner in Rome (cf. 4:18). Their monetary gift had been carried to him by a church member named Epaphroditus who had nearly died during its delivery (cf. 2:27). And when Epaphroditus recovered and prepared to return, Paul asked him to carry the letter home. So the letter arrived late in Paul’s imprisonment, after A.D. 60 and probably after A.D. 62.⁸

Paul’s letter reveals many purposes: to express gratitude for their generosity, to explain why he sent Epaphroditus back so quickly, to catch them up, to inform them that he would shortly be sending Timothy, to warn them of Judaizers, to urge them to stand firm and be united.⁹ But under and around all these purposes was the reality of their fellowship in the gospel.

The very words of Paul’s greeting evoke his attitude of partnership with the Philippians as he tailors his greeting for the occasion. Most noticeably he omits the use of the title “apostle” and begins, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.” The disuse of his title evidences the familiar warmth that existed between him and the Philippian believers.¹⁰ And his inclusion of Timothy as coauthor indicates that Paul would share his authority with those in the “partnership [fellowship] of the gospel.” As Karl Barth put it, “A hero, a genius, a ‘religious personality’ stands alone; an apostle

has others beside him like himself and sets them on his own level.”¹¹ Even more, Paul identifies himself and Timothy as “servants [literal translation, “slaves”] of Christ Jesus” — a term that in its Philippian/Roman context carried negative connotations that were just as repugnant to the fashionable middle class of the first century as today.¹² Paul knew exactly what he was saying because the only other use of “slave” in this letter will come in 2:7, used of Christ who “took the form of a *slave*.”

Along with these careful self-designations Paul identifies his recipients as “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (v. 1). Thus while he recognized the church leaders, he emphasized that he was writing to *all* those in Christ. Paul was not playing favorites. His emphasis on “all” foreshadows the call to unity that he would powerfully voice.

Paul and the Philippians’ fellowship in the gospel, their gospel partnership, gives the theological and relational context and texture for his major themes. At the very heart of the letter is Paul’s call to the Philippians to let their “manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27) and as such, living a gospel-worthy life becomes the theme that extends to the end of chapter 2. Thus, to live worthy of the gospel there must be *unity* — “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27) — in gospel partnership. They must be “of the same mind” (2:2). They must look to “the interests of others” (2:4). They must have the mind of Christ (cf. 2:5-8). They must “work out [their] own salvation” as Christ works in them (2:12,13). They must live like Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) — men who walked worthy of the gospel.

This said, Christ is the center of the letter. No other noun occurs more in Philippians than his name. The Christology of the hymn of Christ in 2:6-11 can be said to underpin the thinking of everything else in Philippians.¹³ Philippians is about Christ. Philippians is about people in Christ Jesus (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). Philippians is about people who are in the fellowship of the gospel because they are in Christ. Philippians is about people whose “citizenship is in heaven” (3:20).

Such grand themes and purposes! And understand this — the motif that sparkles and effervesces throughout them is joy.

- 1:4b: “making my prayer with joy.”
- 1:18b: “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”
- 1:25b: “your . . . joy in the faith.”
- 2:2: “complete my joy,”
- 2:17, 18: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”

- 2:28: “that you may rejoice.”
- 2:29: “so receive him in the Lord with all joy.”
- 3:1: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”
- 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”
- 4:10: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly.”

Philippians evokes a particular joy. It is the joy *of* Christ and joy *from* Christ. It is a joy that effervesces in the dark places of life. It is available for those “in Christ,” who stand together as they partner in the fellowship of the gospel. Our studies in Philippians will enhance our experience of this particular joy.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (1:3-6)

2

Paul's Joyous Thanksgiving

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6

When theologian Broughton Knox was serving as a young chaplain in the British navy on a ship preparing for D-day and the invasion of Normandy, he noted that the minds of all hands on board, regardless of rank, were focused on the invasion's success. No one thought of his own interests, but only on how he could help his shipmates in their commonly shared task. He says, "I remember noting in my mind how I had never been happier."¹

After the invasion and return to England, everyone noticed a difference in the atmosphere on ship. It was still friendly because it was a well-run ship. But several of the sailors, sensing the difference, asked the young chaplain why things had changed. Knox reflects, "The answer was quite simple. During those months that preceded and followed D-day, our thoughts had a minimum of self-centeredness in them. We gave ourselves to our shared activity and objective. . . . Once the undertaking was over we reverted to our own purposes, as we do normally."² Broughton Knox was, of course, reflecting on his ship's experience of the fellowship that people experience in pursuing a common goal. Human friendship is a wonderful thing, but fellowship goes beyond friendship. Fellowship occurs among friends committed to a common cause or goal and flourishes through their common pursuit of it.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* rides upon this reality. The fellowship of the Ring is made up of individuals of disparate origin and ridiculous diversity that exceed any of our ethnic or social differences: four hobbits, tiny beings with large, hairy, shoeless feet — Frodo Baggins and his friends Merry, Sam, and Pippin; two men, warriors of the first rank always dressed for battle — Boromir of Gondor and Aragorn, son of Arathorn II, King of Gondor; one wizard, Gandalf the ancient nemesis of evil

and a repository of wisdom and supernatural power; an elf, Legolas, from a fair race of archers of the forest with pointed ears; and a dwarf, Gimli, a stout, hairy, axe-wielding creature from the dark chambers under the mountains.

The nine members of the fellowship bore few affinities. The elves and the dwarves were like the English and the French because both had an unspoken agreement to feel superior to the other. However, the nine very different individuals, bound together by their great mission to defeat the forces of darkness and save Middle-Earth, became inseparable and their covenant indissoluble. The man Boromir, despite his lapses, gave his life for the hobbits. And the elf and the dwarf came to form a great friendship, so great that Gimli was inducted into an honored order reserved only for elves.

Such can be earthly human fellowship when the conditions are right. But here in Philippians our text has at its heart a depth of fellowship that exceeds any earthly fellowship — “your partnership [fellowship] in the gospel” (v. 5) — which is rooted in God and is a quest that can only be described as eternal.

The theme of verses 3-6 is that of joyous apostolic thanksgiving ringing from Paul’s prison cell in Rome — a thanksgiving grounded in three things: 1) Paul’s remembrance of the Philippians, 2) the Philippians’ participation (fellowship) in the gospel, and 3) Paul’s confidence in their future.

THANKFUL REMEMBRANCE (vv. 3, 4)

Paul’s gratitude. As Paul mused in his Roman cell, his mind ranged across Italy and the Adriatic to Macedonia and over the *Via Egnatia* to “little Rome,” the pretentious Roman colony of Philippi — and the beloved faces of Lydia and her clan, the jailer and his family, Euodia and Syntyche and Clement and scores of others who had been added to the church. And Paul smiled as he wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy” (vv. 3, 4). This is so typical of Paul because, in truth, Paul rarely thanked God for *things*. Paul thanked God for *people* who, despite whatever trouble they may have been to him, remained a source of joy and thanksgiving.³

The Apostle Paul is frankly astonishing in this respect. On an earlier occasion when he had not yet been to Rome but was writing his conclusion to his famous epistle to the Romans, he listed no less than thirty-three names in his concluding greetings (Romans 16). Most of those people he had met on his journeys through Asia and Asia Minor and had subsequently taken up residence in Rome. The great theologian was a people person first and foremost. Imagine the heart and the energy that went into such ministry. Paul was always inquiring and making note of his people’s whereabouts and condition and was thanking God in all his remembrance of them.

Joyful prayer. And the outcome was not only thankfulness to God but joyous petition — “always in every prayer of mine for you all making my

prayer with joy" (v. 4). This was an intensely emotional matter for Paul as the inclusive words "always," "every," and "all" convey.⁴ When he thought of their names, he automatically prayed for them — and that included *all* of them, not just a favored few. But what is most noteworthy is that here in verse 4 Paul begins to sound the note of joy that rings fifteen more times in this letter as it builds to its ringing crescendo in chapter 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (v. 4).

This early joy note is very significant for two reasons. First, the Macedonian churches, among which the Philippian church was prominent, had been noted for their joy amidst affliction. Paul even challenged the Corinthians with their example:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (2 Corinthians 8:1, 2; cf. Acts 16:34)

Perhaps the Philippians, due to the ongoing hostility of their opponents, had begun to lose their abundance of joy. So Paul sounds an early opening note of joy.

Second, Paul himself was in prison, awaiting possible death. This means that joy is not a result of pleasant circumstances or prosperity or success. Joy for Paul (and the Biblical writers) was not an emotion or a mood or a feeling but an *attitude*. And thus it can be commanded, whereas an emotion cannot.⁵ So here in Philippians Paul will command, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord" (3:1), and a few verses later, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (4:4). He even tells them that if he is executed he will rejoice, and so should they (cf. 2:17, 18). He does not urge a feeling but an attitude.

The source of joy is outside itself. It is "in the Lord" (cf. 2:29; 3:1; 4:4, 10). It can be commanded because they are "in the Lord" who gives it.⁶ What Paul does with this early joy note and its fifteen echoes is to assure his close friends who are so burdened about his imprisonment that being in prison has not robbed him of his joy. Paul consciously models the joy that he will command the Philippians to have.⁷ What a standard Paul's remembrance from his jail sets as it evokes thanksgiving and prayer and joy in his soul. What a call to those of us charged with the care of souls to remember all our people always with thanksgiving and joyful prayer.

THANKFUL FOR FELLOWSHIP (v. 5)

Paul's thankful, backward look was based on the long-standing reality of the Philippians' "partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day

until now” (v. 5), which is the center of verses 3-6.⁸ As we have mentioned, the depth of the fellowship that Paul celebrated here exceeds that of any earthly fellowship. The great reason for this is that there was, as Gordon Fee says, a “three-way bond” between Paul, the Philippians, and Christ.⁹ This provided the spiritual glue of their fellowship. Even more, it infused their fellowship in the gospel with the “other-person-centeredness” that exists between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit — the full and perfect fellowship within the Trinity.¹⁰ Elsewhere the Apostle John writes, “and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Thus the fact that they were in Christ provided their fellowship with a cohesion and others-directedness that focused them away from self-interest toward the interests of the fellowship (cf. Philippians 2:4).

The intense pulsating spirituality at the center of the Philippians’ fellowship is obvious in the occurrences of the *koinon* word group (fellowship, partnership, share) in Philippians. It was a fellowship of grace as Paul indicates in 1:7: “for you are all partakers [fellowshippers] with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” It was a fellowship in the Holy Spirit, as is seen in 2:1: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation [fellowship] in the Spirit . . .” It was a fellowship in Christ’s sufferings as seen in Paul’s prayer in 3:10: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings [literally, the fellowship of his sufferings].” And, finally, it was a costly fellowship because the Philippians gave to Paul generously, as is seen in verses 14, 15 of chapter 4: “Yet it was kind of you to share [fellowship in] my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership [fellowship] with me in giving and receiving, except you only.” Thus the mentions of the *koinon* word group in Philippians indicates that their fellowship was rooted in divine grace and in the Holy Spirit and involved sacrifice and suffering.

Bearing in mind that the Philippians’ fellowship rested on a three-way bond in Christ and was infused with the others-directedness of the Trinity and as such was a fellowship of grace and the Spirit and was, further, a costly fellowship — bearing all this in mind, the thing that made Paul’s heart sing with thanksgiving was the Philippians’ “partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day until now” (v. 5).

From day one the Philippians had been gospel partners. Upon their salvation Lydia and her household and the jailer and his household and those saved over the years became stalwarts in the fellowship of the gospel. And from prison Paul gave thanks for “every word spoken and every deed done in behalf of the gospel from the moment of their conversion(s) to the present, including their gift” (Fee).¹¹

What a fellowship it was! Brothers and sisters in Christ's three-way bond, bound together in a great quest — nothing less than the evangelization of the Gentile world, sharing the gospel with all who would hear, reaching out to those in need, living out a divine others-directedness, looking not to their own interests but to the interests of others, suffering in fellowship with Christ, giving in such a way that the astonished apostle would recount how that

in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints — and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. (2 Corinthians 8:2-5)

How Paul loved them, and how they loved him! Now verses 3-5 of Philippians 1 come alive: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." Joyous thanksgiving rings out over "the fellowship of the gospel!"

I recall several years ago a man in the church I was then pastoring musing after his return from a short-term missions project about the wonderful fellowship he had experienced on the trip and wishing that he could experience the same at home. Since then I have reflected that his ten days with a band of brothers and sisters serving in South America united in laboring for the gospel was a happy experience like that of the first-century fellowship of the gospel. Further, I think that when Christians go from church to church looking for good fellowship, they are looking for an illusion.

What do I mean? Fellowship over coffee after a church service is good, but it is not Christian fellowship. It is fellowship among Christians, but not the fellowship that Paul celebrated. Don't misunderstand — having coffee and meals together is one of our great pleasures. I love a cup of coffee with friends. I will eat anything and all that is placed in front of me, relishing it all the more in the company of good friends and conversation!

But if you are looking for true fellowship, give yourself to the gospel at home and around the world. Serve together with others in women's Bible studies, children's ministries, youth ministries. Do short-term missions. Join mercy work to alleviate suffering in places like the vast area devastated by Katrina. Take the good news to the poor. Join a band of brothers and sisters to pray for the world. That is how you will experience genuine Christian fellowship.

THANKFUL CONFIDENCE (v. 6)

Paul's thankful recollections from prison for the Philippians themselves and then for their fellowship in the gospel is freighted with joyful confidence: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Philippians 1:6 may well be the first verse I memorized as a newborn Christian over fifty years ago when, on the night I believed, I underlined this verse in red pencil by flashlight. In fact, I still have that tiny Bible with its fine leaves of India paper. I went to sleep that night secure in the astonishing thought that what God had begun would be continued to the day of Christ.

I was right to do so, though my assurance was embedded in a larger promise because, in terms of the context, Paul was assuring the Philippians that the work of the long-term fellowship of the gospel that God had begun in them would be brought to glorious consummation when Christ returns. Though Paul was in prison, he was absolutely confident that the good work of their gospel partnership would succeed gloriously.

How could this bring such assurance to a twelve-year-old boy reading his Bible by flashlight? The answer is that the fellowship of the gospel in Philippi began *individually* with God's sovereign choice of Lydia as the first convert in Europe. Of Lydia, Luke writes, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). God chose Lydia in Christ before the foundation of the world (cf. Ephesians 1:4). God had begun his "good work" in her, and her salvation was part and parcel of the great work in Philippi. God's sovereign initiative and sovereign faithfulness would see them both through to the end. That is why my assurance under the illumination of my flashlight was not misplaced.

Paul's confidence was in the "Godness of God."¹² Moisés Silva writes, "Theologians who speak of salvation as being God's from beginning to end are not using mere rhetoric, for this is precisely Paul's conception as he addresses the Philippians regarding their share in the gospel."¹³ Everything is from God!

As I reflect on my fifty plus years in Christ it is indeed God who has kept me. It is not my grip on God that has made the difference, but his grip on me. I am not confident in my goodness. I am not confident in my character. I am not confident in my history. I am not confident in my "reverend" persona. I am not confident in my perseverance.

But I am confident in God. I am confident in this word to Lydia and to the jailor and to all the saints in Philippi — and to me: "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). This is a promise for every man, woman, and child who turns to Christ, and it is a promise for the great fellowship of the gospel!

The Apostle Paul looked through the bars of his confinement and

remembered the Philippians with a smile and with prayers laced with joy as he thanked God in all his remembrances of them. His joy was real — not a futile willing but the attitude of a man who knows God is in control. He thanked God for their awesome fellowship in the gospel from the very first day he met them. No church social here, but rather a deep partnership grounded in Christ and the Holy Trinity and in grace and in the Spirit and in suffering and in sacrifice — a robust band of brothers and sisters in a quest for the souls of the world.

And he was confident that when Jesus returned, the work that Jesus inaugurated, he would complete.

Joy pealed from that prison cell in Rome.

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (1:7, 8)

3

Paul's Joyful Affection

PHILIPPIANS 1:7, 8

I had one of the sweetest honors of my life when I spoke at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Granada Heights Friends Church, the church in which I grew up. The memories of that weekend — the faces of old friends (the old faces of friends!) — the faces of loved ones and colleagues and mentors and teachers and youth sponsors and the students under my ministry — will be with me until I no longer know their names and the beloved geography of their faces.

I was there as an almost thirteen-year-old when it all began. I was one of the first three in the “youth group.” I was the lone junior high student, all one hundred pounds of me. I was there in the Sunny Hills American Legion Hall on Sunday mornings when the beer cans were swept out so church could begin. I saw the first spade of earth ceremonially turned in the lemon grove on the corner of Leffingwell and Granada in La Mirada, California. I sat with my mother and younger brother in tie and sport coat listening to the pastor unfold to my uncomprehending but awed soul the glories of the gospel.

Granada Heights was the womb that warmed my young soul until it was ready for birth when Pastor Verl Lindley led me to Christ the summer before my freshman year in high school. At that same time I was called to the gospel ministry under his winsome, manly way. He has been my lifelong example and mentor.

I was lovingly nurtured by my twenty-something youth sponsors Howard and Ruby Busse — young, energetic, positive, big thinkers — who were astonishingly hospitable. As I think back, I remain amazed by their forbearance — for example, when I and my buddies Dave and Jack woke the Busses up because we wanted to talk, and Howard invited us into their bedroom, climbed back in bed, and cheerfully engaged three dopey boys.

The church gave me the milk of the Word through the strong teaching

of my college group teacher Robert Seelye. My education was this: My freshman year Robert taught us through the book of Romans. My sophomore year he began with chapter 1 of Romans, and by June we were in chapter 16. My junior year, you guessed it — Romans! Robert Seelye not only gave me a theological grounding, but the lifelong conviction that God's Word is wholly inerrant, totally sufficient, and massively potent. He gave me the foundation for a life of Biblical exposition. I also must say, as I have said before, that this man remains the most effective personal evangelist I have ever met. He and his wife Barbara are Pauline and apostolic in their worldwide care of souls.

My home church saw me through hard times through the prayers of spiritual mothers like Roselva Taylor who, as I well remember, when I came to church with cuts and a black eye from a fight at a party took me aside and let me know of her commitment to pray for me — and did so for years. Of course, I have had many fathers and mothers of the church, many of whom are now part of the Church Triumphant.

Granada Heights is where I learned ministry from Verl and Lois Lindley. Verl, now in his eighties, still functions for me like the face in a ubiquitous television monitor to whom I look for advice. *What would Verl do?* And his wife, Lois, tiny and lovely with a musical voice, a Bible teacher par excellence, is the reason, I think, I married Barbara, who is so much like her. I served as their high school and college pastor for nearly a decade, and many of my students, now middle-aged (including Rick Hicks, the president of Operation Mobilization USA), have been lifelong friends.

So I can relate to Paul's joyous thanksgiving from faraway Rome for the Philippian church.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (vv. 3-6)

How assuring and triumphant it is to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has in Christ blessed the ministry of my home church and guaranteed its future until the day of Jesus Christ.

I can also relate to Paul's emotional expression of affection for the Philippians, which so naturally flows from his thankfulness as he continues in verses 7, 8, saying:

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprison-

ment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Here Paul's outpouring of affection for the Philippian church is stronger than in any of his other letters.¹

AFFECTION FROM THE HEART (v. 7A)

Paul begins with an intensely personal declaration: "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart" (v. 7a). My experience has taught me that it is virtually a law of spiritual relationships that you will hold very dear to your heart those who have come to Christ under your influence or have grown and benefited from your ministry. Paul's first convert in Europe, Lydia, the extraordinary woman merchant, a seller of purple — a mother of the church — was surely a recurrent face on Paul's spiritual landscape and was dear to his heart. From his jail cell, thoughts of Lydia and her family and the Philippian jailer's clan and the excellent women Euodia and Syntyche warmed his soul, despite their feuding. Paul cherished the thought of them.

The extraordinary depth of his affection rests in the fact that he held them in his heart. This was not a casual aside, as we so often glibly refer to our hearts as a vague pleasantry. Paul had no hearts on his underwear! He never mailed a pink valentine. Paul truly meant he had all of them in the very center of his being, the source of his physical and inner life — his thought processes and emotions and will² — the center of his consciousness.³

An experience from the fiftieth anniversary celebration I mentioned is suggestive of Paul's heart affection. In the early seventies a college student named Jody, a serious Christian as a high school student under my ministry, lost her virginity and became pregnant as the result of a single instance with another counselor at one of the famed West Coast Christian camps. When she came to me, she was being pressured by the young man and his parents to get an abortion. The situation was complicated because the boy's father was a leading elder in one of the prominent evangelical churches of Southern California. I called the pastor, and you can imagine the flap. Jody became a single mom to a beautiful little girl. Fourteen years later in the mid-eighties her lovely daughter became one of the top-ranked tennis players in California. I thought then about how the girl so full of life and promise could have well become refuse to be tossed out at the end of a business day in an abortion clinic. Jody and her daughter have been in my heart for over thirty years. You can imagine my emotion when, after speaking at the evening service of the church's fiftieth anniversary, I turned around to see Jody and her husband standing there along with her daughter and her husband carrying Jody's grandson — three generations! What a celebration of life!

Paul, the great apostle, had all the believers in his heart. The Philippians' physical and spiritual geography was at the center of his life — such was the scope of his affection.

AFFECTION FROM FELLOWSHIP (v. 7B)

Paul's affection likewise rose out of a fellowship of grace that was supercharged with action, as we can see in reading all of verse 7: "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Here we have the same *koinon* or fellowship word as in verse 5 where it is rendered "partnership"; here it is rendered "partakers." You can hear the same sound or assonance in the Greek. In verse 5 we have *koinonia* and in verse 7 *synkoinonoi*, which could be rendered "fellowshippers" — "for you are all fellowshippers with me of grace." Again the sense here is Tolkienesque because the partakers of grace are action-bound like those in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

This is a revelatory moment in Paul's writings because "grace" here is not just saving grace. Rather Paul considers suffering and sacrifice and struggling for the gospel all to be grace. Proof of this can be seen in 1:29 where the verbal form of *charis* ("grace") is used: "For it has been granted [graced] to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." Suffering because of the gospel is a grace in Paul's thinking and theology. Few concepts could have been more revolutionary in the Greco-Roman world. Pagans did not think this way!⁴

But Paul exults in this grace of gospel struggle and affliction that produces and sustains their affection. "My imprisonment" (v. 7) is literally "my chains" because he was actually chained between two guards and was understandably smarting under the oppressive arrangement of never being alone.⁵ But the Philippians fellowshipped with him in his chains by virtue of their prayers and financial gifts (cf. 4:14, 15). They remembered Paul in prison as though in prison with him (cf. Hebrews 13:3). Though so far away, he could sense that their hearts beat pulse for pulse with his. The Philippians were also there to support Paul in his defending the gospel and then confirming it with positive proofs and testimony.⁶ Again, it was the Philippians' love and commitment to the gospel that bound them in their fellowship with Paul. Significantly, the word "gospel" appears more times per line in Philippians than in any book in the New Testament, some nine times (cf. 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27 [twice]; 2:22; 4:3, 15).

So it was that the richness of the fellowship from the grace of Paul's sufferings for the gospel became the ground of deep affection. How true to my experience. Drawing again upon that distant ministry in California, I recall a spring break at the height of the sixties when a band of my young

high-schoolers joined with me to share the gospel. It was 1968, and the place was a fourteen-mile stretch of the Colorado River outside Parker, Arizona, where thousands of students gathered to party with little fear of the meager police force. That, besides the Arizona sun, was the big draw. The going was tough, and my students took their lumps. One even got tossed into the river for his witness! But there was a memorable reward in five students who did come to Christ, several of whom went on to become committed Christians. But above all this there is the affectionate memory of a group of grimy, sunburned students praying together, nursing their wounds, and bravely attempting to share the most important news in the world — partakers of grace in the afflictions and joys that are part and parcel of the defense and confirmation of the gospel. We remain to this day bound with a special affection, which is only a hint of the affection that rose out of Paul's partnership of grace with the Philippians.

What must tie Christians together is this passion for the gospel, this fellowship in the gospel. Nothing else is strong enough to hold us all together. The gospel — this good news that in Jesus, God himself has reconciled us to himself — brings about a precious God-centeredness that we share with other believers.

CHRIST'S AFFECTION (v. 8)

From his prison in Rome, Paul so welled up with emotion that he called God as witness to the depth of his affection: "For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Such an oath was rare in Paul's letters, but he wanted to drive the truth of his longing and affection for the Philippians deep into their hearts by calling God as witness because God alone knew the contours of his inner life. The God-attested truth is that Paul yearned (longed) for all of them. Toward the end of the book (in 4:1) Paul will use the same word amidst mounting expressions of affection: "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown . . ."

But what he wanted them to see most of all was that his God-attested affection for them was "the affection of Christ Jesus." The word "affection" literally is "the inward parts," referring to what we call the viscera. Alec Motyer, the esteemed preacher and commentator, explains:

It expresses a yearning that is as much physical as mental, a longing love which moves the whole inner being. But what a remarkable expression Paul uses! He loves them "in the inner being of Christ Jesus." Certainly this means that he patterns his love for them on that of Christ (*cf.* Eph. 5:1), but the wording demands something more than the notion of "imitation." Paul is saying that he has so advanced in union with Christ that it is as if Christ were expressing His love through Paul. Two hearts are beating as

one — indeed one heart, the greater, has taken over and the emotional constitution of Christ Himself has taken possession of His servant.⁷

This was so incredible that Paul felt it necessary, as he wrote from his cell, to call God as witness that it was true. So we see in this culminating expression of affection the standard that we all must pursue — the very affection of Christ Jesus. This is possible because of the three-way bond that exists between us individually, our fellow believers, and Christ — a bond that is charged with the other-person-centeredness of the Holy Trinity as we have fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Paul's affection for the Philippians overflowed here because 1) he held the Philippians in his heart, and 2) they shared in the hardships of the ministry of the gospel, and 3) Paul truly longed for them with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Time is flying by for all of us, and over the years we will be separated by distance and time. But whether near or far, may the bonds of our affection be such that we hold each other in our hearts, remembering with fond affection our fellowship together in the grace of gospel ministry — longing for all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (1:9-11)

4

Paul's Prayer

PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

Verses 3-11 of the opening chapter of Philippians form a single paragraph that functions as an introduction to the whole of the book and as such introduces many of the themes and motifs of the letter. Although this is a cohesive unit, I have chosen to divide verses 3-11 into three studies because they are so theologically packed.

“Paul’s Joyous Thanksgiving” is the title I gave to the study on verses 3-6 because as Paul’s thoughts from his prison cell drifted across the Adriatic into northern Macedonia and Philippi he wrote, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.” Paul’s deep thanksgiving for the Philippian church then evoked “Paul’s Joyful Affection,” the title of our study on verses 7, 8. Though the apostle was in chains in Rome his heart wasn’t chained, and it was in his unfettered heart that Paul held every last one of the Philippians — at the very center of his being. This was not hyperbole but spiritual reality. Paul’s oath, “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (v. 8) was a declaration that the very affection of Christ himself was controlling him. This affection would effervesce again later in 4:1 when he called them “my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.”

Now, having the breadth of Paul’s thanksgiving for the Philippians before us, along with the depth of Paul’s astonishing affection, we come to Paul’s prayer for the Philippian believers in verses 9-11. Here Paul builds on the mention of his joyful prayer in verse 4 and makes prayer the rising emotional climax to his introduction. Paul’s opening words — “And it is my prayer” — informed the Philippians, and us, that this is *how* and *what* Paul prayed when he prayed for them. This brief text is both humbling and

elevating. That is what it has been for me. Do we pray like this? Have we ever prayed like this? Paul tells us that there are things more important than our day-to-day needs.

PRAYER FOR ABOUNDING LOVE (v. 9A)

Paul opens with a statement that is stunning in itself: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more” (v. 9a) — stunning because “love” here has no object. He doesn’t say “that your love *for God* may abound more and more,” nor does he say “that your love *for one another* may abound more and more.”¹ This is because Paul prayed that love would overflow up to God and out to each other in limitless abundance. Paul, always rooted in the Old Testament, knew that the two tables of the Ten Commandments were structured in just this way. The first four command love for God, and the second six command love for others. Vertical love first, horizontal love second. Thus Paul prayed that the Philippians’ love would overflow all dimensions in a lavish, ongoing, limitless love — an unremitting geyser of love up to God and a flood of love out to others. The old Latin commentator Bengel says, “The fire in the apostle never says, It is enough.”² Paul is passionate here — *more love, more love!*

PRAYER FOR KNOWLEDGE AND INSIGHT (v. 9B)

At the same time, we know that Paul was not praying for a shapeless, uninformed overflow of love because the whole of verse 9 reads, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.”

Knowledge. Our existential, postmodern culture is very sentimental about love. We have heard from the sixties on, “All you need is love,” as if other-directed goodwill is the answer to life. A modern proverb says, “Love is blind,” suggesting that blissful ignorance is part and parcel of love. Frank Sheed gave us a prophetic word for such foolishness:

A virtuous man may be ignorant, but ignorance is not a virtue. It would be a strange God Who could be loved better by being known less. Love of God is not the same thing as knowledge of God; love of God is immeasurably more important than knowledge of God; but if a man loves God knowing a little about Him, he should love God more from knowing more about Him: for every new thing known about God is a new reason for loving Him.³

The more we know of God, the more reason we will have to love him.

The word that Paul uses here to urge that our overflow of love be “with

knowledge" (*epignosis*) is used by Paul in all fifteen occurrences in his letters to mean the knowledge of God and of Christ.⁴ It is a personal knowledge. It is "profoundly existential, relational and responsive" (Bockmuehl).⁵ And Paul was super-passionate that his converts increase in this knowledge. In fact all four of the "prison epistles" pray for this at the end of his introductions.

- Ephesians 1:17: "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him."

- Philippians 1:9: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."

- Colossians 1:9, 10: "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

- Philemon 6: "[A]nd I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ."

We must understand that Christian love is never a matter of sentimentality. Christian love comes from a work of the Holy Spirit bringing the revelation of Christ through the Word of God. And the more you are in the Word, the more your knowledge of God and Christ will increase, and the more your love will overflow. All the Scriptures speak of Christ (cf. John 5:46)! And each new thing you learn of him will become a fresh reason for loving him.

Remember this: a superficial love for God is a sure sign of a superficial knowledge of God. This is why we must give priority to gathered worship with our Bibles and hearts open to God. This is why we must daily open the Scriptures for ourselves and teach them to our children. This is why we must read both the Old and New Testaments with our eyes wide open to Christ, whom God has made known (cf. John 1:18). This is why the Gospels and epistles must be in our souls. The more you know of him, the more your love will rush up to him and out to the world! This is why Paul prayed that their "love [would] abound more and more, with knowledge."

Insight. There is, of course, another important word here because "knowledge" is coupled with "all discernment" or more precisely, "all insight." This Greek word appears only here in the New Testament, but it is used twenty-two times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament book of Proverbs where it means practical insight, the insight that informs conduct — practical conduct.⁶

What remarkable movement we have in Paul's prayer for his beloved

church — a limitless overflow of love to God and others, coupled with a growing knowledge of Christ and God (both reciprocally increasing the other), and all of this producing practical insight for living. Several years ago Dr. Kyung Chik Han, pastor of the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, was honored at a fifty-year class reunion at Princeton Theological Seminary. He answered several questions at that banquet. Dr. Earl Palmer was there and remembers:

At one point he explained the theological examination process for elders in the Young Nak Church, which with a membership of 50,000 communicants is the largest Presbyterian church in the world. He said that each prospective elder was examined in ‘Bible, Theology, Church History and Common Sense.’ Yes, of course, I thought to myself when I heard his remarks — common sense should be added to Theology, Church History and Bible!*

Indeed. We see that right here in Paul’s prayer invoking practical insight for day-to-day living for his dearest friends. Who says theology is irrelevant? Again, overflowing love coupled to a growing personal knowledge of God leads to practical insight for common everyday living — the kind of quality essential for eldership in that vast Korean church and for any success in Christian living. This is what we all so desperately long for as we seek to lead our families and the church.

PRAYER FOR ASSESSING WHAT IS BEST (v. 10A)

What benefits! But there is more as Paul’s line of prayer thought extends to a further result — “so that you may approve what is excellent” (v. 10a).

The idea here is intensely practical: it is to examine or test what is before us so as to determine what is excellent or the best. Originally this was applied to determining the best, for example, among metals or livestock. Here it has to do with our lives as Christians. Markus Bockmuehl describes this as “the Spirit-bred ability to discern that which God has already marked off as essential or ‘superlative’ regarding life in Christ.”⁸ This ability includes not only distinguishing right from wrong but also the best from second best.⁹

Life for everyone, and especially believers, is a series of choices. What we choose day to day will shape the course of our lives. Foolish choices will leave us unprepared for the coming King. It is the little choices that determine our spiritual vitality because they in turn govern bigger choices. Most of us have little trouble distinguishing the big issues. We know that theft and murder are wrong and that generosity and justice are right. But in the gray area, choices involve a range of options that are not so clearly moral or clear-cut. It is here that we find difficulty in discerning the best.

What confused lives so many Christians lead because they do not have the wherewithal to discern what is best.

To see falsely is worse than blindness. A man who is so blind that he cannot distinguish the ditch from the road still may be able to feel which is which. But if he sees the ditch as the road and the road as the ditch, he is in big trouble. And many today are in big trouble.

However, if God's children overflow with love to God and others, along with a growing personal knowledge of God and Christ and practical insight, they will be able to discern and choose what is superlative — the best over the second best — the best over the good — the best in knowledge of God — the best in priorities — the best in habits — the best in pleasures — the best in pursuits — the best course of action for themselves and for their families.

What a beautiful prayer Paul prays for his beloved! May our prayers for one another be that we will be able to discern what God has marked off as best. That's what you need, fathers. That's what you need, mothers. That's what you need, leaders. And that is what Paul prays for.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY OF CHRIST (vv. 10B, 11)

Paul's brief account of how he prays concludes with his ultimate purpose for the Philippians, which is readiness for the coming of Christ: "and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (vv. 10b, 11). This is the second mention of "the day of Christ," as Paul already referred to it in the famous words of verse 6. Paul wanted the Philippians to be prepared. You can sense the urgency in the Greek, which literally reads "*against* the day of Christ"¹⁰ — Paul wants them to stand well under the divine scrutiny. "Preparation for the day of the Lord was for Paul neither a pious platitude nor a millenarian obsession, but a way of life" (Bockmuehl).¹¹ Christian growth was not an end in itself but had an eye to the grand goal of standing before Christ. Paul was sublimely obsessed with the coming of that day,¹² and this graced obsession controlled his prayer for his beloved Philippians.

Pure and blameless. His prayer was that they would be "pure and blameless" against that great day (cf. v. 10b). "Pure" means "unmixed," as in unmixed substances. It denotes transparency of heart, a heart with pure and unmixed desires.¹³ Paul prays for their moral transparency — that "what you see is what you get" with the Philippians, and it is good.

"Blameless" is literally "without stumbling," "not stumbling."¹⁴ And this metaphorical sense enhances the picture. Paul's prayer is that the Philippians will live pure, morally transparent lives, free from stumbling — and thus

stand upright and pure on that day in the dazzling presence of Christ who knows all. Oh, to pray like this for each other!

Filled with the fruit of righteousness. But Paul wants more than that the Philippians stand pure and tall and acquitted before Christ, because he further prays that they may be filled with the fruit of godly deeds¹⁵ — “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” — that the righteousness of Christ would be evident in righteous, fruitful living. This means first that the heart qualities Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit — “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23) — would work themselves out in the substantive fruit of godly deeds.

A tree that bears fruit is alive. But a tree that is filled with fruit glorifies the gardener’s care! “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit” (John 15:5). “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8). When Christ returns, Paul wants the Philippians to be like fruit trees at harvest, their branches hung low, laden with the good deeds that Christ has worked in and through them.

For the praise and glory of God. Predictably, Paul concludes with a doxology. All this is for “the glory and praise of God” (v. 11b). This is a fitting conclusion not only to the prayer but to the whole paragraph. The truth is, as John Piper says, “All who cast themselves on God find that they are carried into endless joy by God’s omnipotent commitment to his own glory.”¹⁶

Paul reveled in the thought of God’s glory. At the climax of the Christ hymn later in Philippians we read, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:10). And then there will be the climactic doxology at the letter’s end: “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (4:20). Such elation! Such joy!

This magnificent introductory paragraph that began with Paul’s thanksgiving for the Philippians and then moved to his affection for them has now concluded with Paul’s description of how he prayed for them. This is the substance of real prayers, repeatedly offered in real time and space and history by a real man. This is not pious spiritual musing. This is *how* and *what* Paul prayed.

What the apostle has outlined has relevance for those of us who care at all for our families and the body of Christ. Certainly we must pray for our jobs and our finances and our health and our children’s grades and friendships. But if that is it, we have missed it. We need love to overflow in a limitless geyser up to God and out to others. We need to have our love ride and expand upon an increasing knowledge of God as revealed in Christ Jesus — because the more we know of him, the more we will love him.

We need to grow in all discernment — practiced insight and common sense for living. We need to be able to weigh the choices before us and choose what is excellent, the best. We need to be ready for the day of Christ. We need to be transparently pure and stand upright before Christ in that day. And as we stand tall, our lives need to be hung heavy with the fruit of the righteousness that comes through Jesus. We need our lives to be a doxology to the glory and praise of God as part of the endless, joyous commitment to God's glory.

And more, this is what we need to pray for each other. Parents, this is what we must pray for our children and grandchildren. This is a call for real prayers for real people in real space and real time.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (1:12-18a)

5

The Gospel First!

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-18A

The Apostle Paul lists his extensive sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11. Has anyone in recorded history suffered so much over the course of years — multiple near-death floggings — gruesome stoning — frequent shipwrecks — dangers on the road from both places and people — great suffering over an extended period of time? Is there an equal to Paul's suffering? Probably not. The annals of the world's epic lives and journeys contain nothing to rival the courage and endurance and love of the Apostle Paul. He is not only the church's great hero but the world's great hero.

You would think that Paul's unparalleled sufferings and endurance would elevate him above criticism. In fact, he suggested just that at the end of his letter to the Galatians: "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (6:17).

But that was not to be because as Paul sat in chains in Rome, some in the church were apparently bitter toward him, feeling that his appeal to the emperor would bring harder times upon them. They reasoned that if Paul hadn't gone up to Jerusalem in the first place, he likely wouldn't have been arrested. He knew the establishment in Jerusalem hated him. He should have anticipated the outcome. Now, as a prisoner of Rome, he was bringing unwanted attention on the church. Paul was too headstrong, they said. Cooler heads must prevail. Besides, the fact that Paul was in chains, and his ministry therefore confined, seemed evidence enough that God's validating hand had been lifted from him.

But Paul, the old gospel warhorse, was not impressed or intimidated by such thinking and forcefully set the record straight for the Philippians and all history. "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (v. 12). With the barest allusion to his

circumstances, Paul exulted in the advancement of the gospel, which for him was the main thing, the great thing, his abiding passion — especially in this short book as the noun “gospel” appears nine times (cf. 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27 [twice]; 2:22; 4:3, 15). By “gospel” he means the preaching of Christ (his death, resurrection, and present lordship) rather than the results of preaching.¹ Paul’s imprisonment meant that the preaching of the gospel advanced in Rome.

Paul’s utter fixation on the proclamation of the gospel is evidenced by the two mentions of the gospel in our text (vv. 12, 16) plus the recurrent synonymous phrases “to speak the word,” “preach Christ,” “proclaim Christ.”

For Paul, the advance of the gospel overrides all else. Everything in Paul’s life is subsumed to this end. If we fail to understand this, we fail to understand Paul.

ADVANCE THROUGH IMPRISONMENT (vv. 12-14)

Paul leaves no doubt as to the gospel’s progress both among pagans and among Christians.

Among pagans. As to the gospel’s furtherance in pagan Rome, he explains, “so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (v. 13). The imperial guard, the praetorium, consisted of 9,000 handpicked soldiers who were honored with double pay, good pensions, and special duties. Among their not-so-special duties was that of guarding imperial prisoners by an attached chain. So Paul experienced a shuffle of soldiers manacled to him. Certainly few of the 9,000 *praetoriani*² were chained to Paul, but the gospel effect was exponential. As soldier after soldier was chained to him in successive watches, they heard the gospel both directly and from Paul’s conversations with his visitors. My imagination hears the apostle’s silent prayer as a new soldier is chained to him — “Thank you, Lord. Here’s another one to tell about Jesus.” So as the *praetoriani* observed and listened to the great apostle, they heard the astonishing story of the long-promised Jewish Messiah, who was crucified as the Jewish Scriptures predicted and was resurrected as their Scriptures predicted and, amazingly, forgives sins through his death and resurrection.

Ironically (sublimely!), Paul’s imprisonment brought the gospel to the very heart of secular political power in Rome. As to how many believed, we do not know. But we do know that the gospel was preached among the Praetorian Guard and that some believed, because Paul closes this letter saying, “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household” (4:21, 22).

Among Christians. The gospel advanced into paganism, and it likewise

made an advance in the Christian community: “And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (v. 14). Persecution has regularly been just what the doctor ordered for fearful Christians. I cannot forget turning the pages of the February 1956 issue of *Life* magazine and tremulously viewing the photos that *Life*’s famous photographer Cornell Capa had taken of the scene where five young missionaries had died at the hands of the primitive Aucas and the striking photos of their wives and children, and then some months later staying up far into the night reading Elisabeth Elliot’s *Through Gates of Splendor* and *The Shadow of the Almighty* as I took to heart her husband’s words: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”³

My wife, Barbara, and I never imagined we would meet Elisabeth Elliot, much less get to know her. But decades later Barbara, along with several others, was invited to Elisabeth’s seaside home north of Boston where Elisabeth spent several days sharing her life with them as she recounted those storied events and her long walk with God.

The wholehearted commitment of the five young missionary couples has remained in my heart. And today whenever I see those haunting black-and-white photos and read the account, it evokes the springtime of my growing commitment to the gospel, just as it has done for tens of thousands.

Paul’s imprisonment had issued in a springtime of commitment in the Roman church. Previously timid believers began “to speak the word without fear.” And it was not a “baker’s dozen” but most of the Christian community. It was gospel time in the Eternal City!

I wonder, will it take the same experience to drive away our fears and make us bold with the gospel?

ADVANCE THROUGH ILL WILL AND GOODWILL (vv. 15-18A)

All was not well in the Roman church despite the fact that the vast majority had the courage to speak the word. There were actually two groups of preachers in the church who proclaimed Christ but from different motives: “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will” (v. 15).

On the one hand, Paul was suffering from the classic malady known as the hatred of theologians, termed by the Latin doctors *odium theologicum* — evidenced here in “envy and rivalry,” ugly terms that pop up elsewhere in Paul’s lists of vices (cf. Galatians 5:20ff. and Romans 1:29). The Greek historian Xenophon said, “The envious are those annoyed only at their friends’ successes.”⁴ So envy is more set on depriving the other person of the desired thing than to gain it.⁵ John of the Cross explained its pathology in the church: “As far as envy is concerned, many experience displeasure

when they see others in possession of spiritual goods. They feel sensibly hurt because others surpass them on this road, and they resent it when others are praised.”⁶ Paul had come to Rome with a long list of ministerial successes to his credit. Notwithstanding his unimpressive appearance, the gifts Paul possessed were immense, unique apostolic endowments. He had taken the gospel to Asia Minor and on into Europe, fighting Judaizers and heretics all the way — and had won. When Paul arrived in Rome, the focus of the church turned naturally to the apostle, and some of the leadership turned green with envy and began a contentious gospel rivalry.

On the other hand, the majority preached Christ “from good will.” And Paul explains of them, “The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel” (v. 16). They understood that Paul was under orders issued by God⁷ and that his captivity was part of his defense of the gospel. So those in the majority were motivated to preach Christ by their love for God and their love for his apostle.

Thus there were two opposing groups in Rome who preached the gospel. We understand those who did it out of love. But who were those who did it from ill will? For starters, they were not heretics or apostates. They were not preaching another gospel or another Christ. If they had been, Paul would have said, as he did to the Galatians, “let him be accursed” (cf. Galatians 1:8, 9). Paul’s detractors were preaching the Biblical Jesus. They were not anti-Christ but anti-Paul.

They preached the true gospel motivated by a warped amalgam of perversity. Again, they preached Christ “out of rivalry” (v. 17) or out of selfish ambition. These preachers were petty, territorial, calculating, and focused on self-promotion.⁸ Paul’s diminution could mean their elevation. John Claypool said in his 1979 Yale Lecture on Preaching that even while in seminary he experienced jealous jockeying for position and that his experience in the parish ministry had not been much different. He writes:

I can still recall going to state and national conventions in our denomination and coming home feeling drained and unclean, because most of the conversation in the hotel rooms and the halls was characterized either by envy of those who were doing well or scarcely concealed delight for those who were doing poorly. For did that not mean that someone was about to fall, and thus create an opening higher up the ladder?⁹

Such men’s twisted perversity evoked not only rivalry but insincerity (mixed motives) in their proclamation of Christ. So along with the exalted motive of glorifying Christ by preaching the cross and bringing sinners to him, they preached, as Paul says, “not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment” (v. 17). The sheer cussedness of this is astonishing. The

literal sense of “to afflict me” is “to raise up affliction,” so that “The meaning is . . . to stir up some inward annoyance, some trouble of spirit” (O’Brien).¹⁰ They actually preached Christ with the hope that it would rub salt in Paul’s wounds. How small! How perverse! There can be no doubt that their actions did hurt him and made his imprisonment worse.

The Apostle Paul had ample reason to feel down. He was the missionary general of the early church, a type A personality if there ever was one. Confinement was tough on his activist soul. He knew the gospel as did no other. He was the preeminent theologian of the apostolic church. He had more knowledge in his little finger than his detractors had in their combined IQs. He had the right stuff. He could take a beating like no one else. No one could gainsay his experience. But Paul refused to have a pity party. There was no “Why me?” from Paul.

Rather, Paul voiced an astonishing attitude: “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18). Paul was so gospel-intoxicated, so centered on getting the good news of Christ out to the lost in Rome, that his feelings and aspirations were subsumed and subject to the gospel.

Don Carson writes:

Paul’s example is impressive and clear: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives — all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible; none is to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations become so devouring that the Christian’s central aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence entirely.¹¹

So the centrality of the gospel is the great question and challenge for us. Is the gospel first and foremost in our lives and in our church? The answer will determine our future.

The history of some of the mainline Protestant denominations in our country serves to make the point. There were generations that believed the gospel and held that there were certain accompanying social and political entailments. Then came a generation that assumed the gospel but identified with the entailments. The next generation denied the gospel but made the entailments everything. This is a caricature that is simplistic and reduction-

ist. Nevertheless, in broad swaths it describes Protestant liberalism in America.¹²

When the gospel is no longer the main thing, when it becomes assumed, the next generation may be lost. As evangelicals we must take note. All kinds of issues cry for our attention — abortion, pornography, media bias, economic justice, racial discrimination, classism, sexism, to name a few. And we need to be alert and involved in certain of them. But if any of them become the main thing so that the gospel is marginalized, beware!

Am I advocating an insular, privatized faith? Not at all. The gospel preached by gospel-first people led the way in the abolition of slavery, prison reform, child labor laws, and the protection of women, as the writings of Charles Colson and Marvin Olasky attest.¹³

We each have our calling in life, as electrician or teacher or mother or plumber or analyst or lawyer or mechanic or musician or fireman. But whatever our calling, the gospel must be first.

Life will have its ups and downs for all of us. There will be times when we will feel metaphorically chained by the circumstances of life — misunderstood, maligned, ignored, spitefully used. But if the gospel is first in our life, we will be able to say with Paul, “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18).

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. (1:18b-26)

6

Paul's Joyous Confidence

PHILIPPIANS 1:18B-26

Several weeks before Andrew Chong, a beloved physician and a former elder in the church I pastored for many years, passed away, he was taken to Northwestern Hospital in Chicago to have a stint cleared of blockage. The procedure was invasive, and after some time the surgeon came out and indicated that he could not go on because there was too much bleeding. He said, "You'd better get your family here. He may not make it through the night." So all the children were rushed to Andrew's bedside, where they gathered weeping and saying their good-byes.

Andrew had just come out of the anesthetic and was in intense pain and unable to speak. Seeing his family's distress, he made a curious motion with his finger, which they finally understood as a request for a pen. Of late he had been unable to write in a straight line. But now, very slowly and with intense deliberation, he wrote twelve words in a single column.

*For to me
to live
is Christ
and
to die
is gain.*

Andrew anchored the column with "Hallelujah." The writing of that last word took him a full minute as he made sure he spelled it correctly (always the precise surgeon). And then he spoke: "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed."

It was his soul's spontaneous last will and testament. These beautiful

words, of course, were not original with Dr. Chong but were penned by the Apostle Paul who was himself in difficult circumstances as a prisoner of Rome. In fact, Paul alluded to his own possible death saying, “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Philippians 2:17). Andrew had reached back to Paul’s victorious declaration in the midst of a world ostensibly falling apart and made it his own. Andrew Chong’s subscript — “Hallelujah,” which means “Praise the Lord” — was the careful signature of his soul’s joyous confidence and submission to the will of God.

This famous aphorism — “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21) — perhaps the most often quoted line from Philippians, stands at the spiritual center of the paragraph before us — a section in which Paul dynamically affirms his joyous confidence in God. May our consideration of Paul’s words from prison both ground and spike our confidence in Christ as we live through the difficulties of life.

CONFIDENCE IN FINAL VINDICATION (vv. 18B-20)

Paul is affirming his joy amidst the chains of his present imprisonment. “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18a).

Confident in deliverance. As Paul looks to the future, he opens with a remarkable declaration of joy-filled confidence in his personal deliverance: “Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (18b, 19).

This is a notable assertion because Paul is not referring to physical deliverance. The word he uses here for “deliverance” is *soterian* which is generally translated “salvation” and usually refers to the final deliverance of believers at the last judgment when they stand vindicated before God.¹ Paul was confident of this ultimate deliverance, whatever Caesar decided to do with him. The same confidence was expressed from prison by Paul to Timothy at the end of his second letter to his young assistant: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:18). Thus Paul was entirely confident in his ultimate deliverance.

At the same time he was not confident in his self-contained spiritual resources. Rather, his confidence in deliverance rested upon the prayers of the Philippians, which then would bring on the supply of the Spirit of Christ in his life. . . . for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (v. 19). More accurately the word “help” should read “supply,” referring to the Spirit himself whom God supplies.² So the Philippians’ prayers would bring about God’s supplying the Spirit to Paul.

How was this? After all, Paul was already indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as are all believers, as Paul had explained earlier to the Romans: "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (8:9b). Furthermore, all believers have all of the Spirit all the time. However, there are apparently times when believers experience more of the Spirit's fullness and power. The dramatic encounters of the book of Acts affirm this repeatedly. As the Apostle Peter stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, he was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and spoke (4:8). When the apostles were released by the Sanhedrin, we read that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31b). Next, prior to Stephen's stoning, we read, "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55). Later, when Paul confronted Elymas the magician, Paul was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and judged him (13:9). And, lastly, when Paul and Barnabas were driven from Pisidian Antioch, we read of those left behind, "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13:52). So we see that the book of Acts repeatedly demonstrates that God's servants regularly receive special supplies of the Spirit's filling during times of trial.³

Thus as Paul sat in Roman custody he was confident that as the Philippians prayed, fresh supplies of the Spirit of Jesus Christ would be poured into his heart, empowering him for every trial and securing his ultimate deliverance. Paul knew that his converts in Philippi, those who shared in the fellowship of the gospel (1:5), prayed for him, and that is why he naturally solicited their prayers, knowing that they would pray. This fueled his towering confidence in his difficult situation. In fact, his declaration, "this will turn out for my deliverance" was a conscious echo of Job amidst his troubles when that man of God said, "Even this will turn out for my deliverance" (Job 13:16, LXX).⁴

Paul had massive confidence. But there was not a hint of self-confidence or self-sufficiency. He was dependent upon his friends' prayers for the supply of the Spirit. Their prayers would actually give him fresh fillings of the Spirit for each new challenge. It is the same today. We must practice this as we pray for each other, and especially for those undergoing challenging times. Our prayers can effect not only the confidence but the deliverance of our brothers and sisters.

Confident that Christ will be honored. Paul's confidence in his deliverance was matched by his confidence that Christ would be honored, "as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (v. 20).

The apostle's confidence pulsates. To understand it, we must set aside

our normal English usage of *hope* with its note of uncertainty, as in “I hope the Bears will beat the San Francisco 49ers” or as with crossed fingers we say, “Let’s hope it won’t rain.” In contrast to this, Biblical hope brims with certainty because it is based upon the fact that “God is God and has under-written the future” (Bockmuehl).⁵

Paul’s “hope” radiated with confidence. Here Biblical hope is coupled with “eager expectation,” an expression that appears only here and in Romans 8:19 where it describes physical creation’s “eager longing” for ultimate redemption that will come with “the revealing of the sons of God.” Thus, Paul’s statement “it is my eager expectation and hope” referred to his intense expectation of what is sure to happen⁶ — his breathless confidence and certitude. Paul’s intense confidence was that “I will not be at all ashamed” because the progress of the gospel would not and could not be thwarted by even the worst outcome of his trial before Caesar.

The apostle’s confident, breathless expectation was that “with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (v. 20b). Paul fully expected to be courageous and bold in holding forth the gospel before Caesar, so that Christ would be honored whether he lived or died. In effect he confidently said, “My body will be the theatre in which Christ’s glory is displayed” (Ellicott).⁷

Paul, the veteran of hundreds of lashes and a thousand indignities, did not know what pains and humiliations awaited him. Yet, there was no fear in Paul. Rather, there was bounding, eager confidence that whatever happened, Christ would be surely glorified.

CONFIDENCE IN LIFE OR DEATH (vv. 21-24)

Confident ideal. With this, Paul gave the Philippians his triumphant aphorism — a proverb for the church universal — an ideal for every believing soul: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). When the Philippians heard this read, the effect must have been stunning because of its parallelism, tonal assonance, and compactness (in the original Greek there are no verbs, which is normal, good Greek grammar. But these distinctions together makes the statement epigrammatic): “For to me to live Christ, and to die gain.”

How could Paul say “For to me to live is Christ”? At the deepest level it was because Christ was in him and he was in Christ — a description used more than any other in the New Testament to describe the believer’s living, saving union with Christ. The classic expression of this “in Christ” truth is in another verb-less Greek sentence: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Greek is explosive: “If anyone in Christ — new creation!” The miracle of mutual “in-ness” with the divine Christ lay at the root of Paul’s astonishing confidence — “for to me to live is Christ.”

Along with this, Paul could say, "For to me to live is Christ," because he had taken up the cross of the suffering Christ. As Paul explained to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). We must understand that "For to me to live is Christ" is not the triumphant sentimentality of a trouble-free life but the joyous embrace of the burdens of the cross of Christ.

In effect, altogether this meant that Christ was at the conscious center of everything — so that Paul had a Christ-centered ministry, a Christ-powered ministry, and a Christ-exalting ministry. Paul would have lauded the declaration of Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, the father of German Protestant missions, "I have but one enthusiasm; it is He, only He."⁸

This was utterly true for Paul, as he said later in this letter: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (3:10).

*All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being's ransomed powers;
All my thoughts and words and doings,
All my days and all my hours.*

MARY D. JAMES, "ALL FOR JESUS," 1889⁹

"For to me to live is Christ" — Paul's confidence in this life extended into death — "and to die is gain." To borrow the Apostle John's words, "we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2b). Paul's death would also mean that his righteousness in Christ (cf. Philippians 3:9) would have its full effect. In this world Paul was still beset with his own sins — as Luther would say, "At the same time justified, yet a sinner." But in death, the battle would be over, and the apostle would repose in all righteousness. Such gain! In this world Paul experienced pain after pain and trauma upon trauma, but come death it would all be over — no "mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4b).

The clarity and sanity of Paul's confident dictum "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" shows up the shallow tragedy of so many in Paul's day and now. Among the ruins of ancient Carthage there is an inscription carved by a Roman soldier: "To laugh, to hunt, to bathe, to game — that is life."¹⁰ "For to me to live is to hunt, go to the baths, and party!" As the Looney Tunes *finis* says, "That's all, folks!" It is the same today because most will fill in the blank of "For to me to live is ——" with anything but Christ.

According to the tabloids and celebrity magazines, "for to me to live is" to fornicate, to accumulate, to dine well. Or on a more prosaic level, "for to me to live is" to golf, to work, to garden, to travel, to watch TV, to

ski — to shop 'til I drop. Of course, if this be our life, then death is the loss of everything. When Queen Elizabeth I, the idol of European fashion, was dying, she turned to her lady-in-waiting and said, "O my God! It is over. I have come to the end of it — the end, the end."¹¹

But when Dr. Andrew Chong came to the end, he wrote, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Hallelujah" and confidently said, "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed." Now he lives in eternal gain.

Confident deliberations. Having given voice to that stunning aphorism, Paul paused to talk to himself and knowingly invited the Philippians to witness the inner deliberations of his heart. He debated for their benefit what he would do as to life and death if it were up to him. "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (vv. 22-24). For Paul, "Death is a glorious possession of Christ; life is a glorious bearing of fruit" (Motyer).¹² Some choice! His options hemmed him in like ever-narrowing walls of rock on either side. He was literally "hard pressed" to choose between two marvelous possibilities.

But here pleasant thoughts of death tipped the scales: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (v. 23). Paul's confidence about the delight of death was unbounded. The word he used for "depart" is an inviting metaphor suggesting a ship's moorings being cast off, weighing anchor, rising on the tide, and sailing toward the shore of home.¹³ This image appears with great effect in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

In modern terms I imagined this gentle transition from here to Heaven when Barbara and I took a train from Interlaken, Switzerland, to Domodossola, Italy. After a brief glimpse of the Swiss countryside, our train hurtled through a dark tunnel under the Alps where, after a brief journey, we burst into the sunshine of Italy and Domodossola! Paul passionately longed to be able to pull out of the station and be in the light of Christ's presence. Paul's citizenship was already there (cf. 3:20). He longed for the "far better." He had earlier been to the third heaven and its paradise, to the abode of God, where he heard words that he was not permitted to speak (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:4). But he had glimpsed the "far better." So for Paul, death would be "far better" than anything that could happen or be imagined.

Death for the Christian is always far better. I believe that with all my heart — whether you are nine months, nine years, or ninety-nine years old! Death was especially inviting for this man who had been beaten with hundreds of stripes, left for dead, and was now imprisoned in Rome. Later he would tell Timothy:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Such confident longing. But Paul was not into himself or instant gratification, but others. So he concluded amiably, “But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Philippians 1:24). What grips us here is that the apostle’s deep longing for Heaven and the face of Christ was subordinated to what is best for his converts.

Paul was not only a gospel-first man (cf. vv. 12-18a), but he was an others-first man! Frank Thielman writes:

Every major feature of his life at the time when he wrote the letter — his physical comfort, the opinions others have about him, his position with respect to the secular authorities, and the question of whether he lives or dies — are molded by his commitment to the advancement of the gospel.¹⁴

Paul’s deliberations modeled for the Philippians what he would clearly teach in 2:4: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” **Christ was more important to him than life itself, and others were more important to him than being in Heaven with Christ.** What a needed message for the church as it stands amidst a me-first culture that makes self-fulfillment into entitlement.

CONFIDENT OF REUNION (vv. 25, 26)

The realization that remaining alive for the present is more important than his ultimate desire gives Paul the confidence that he will live beyond his present imprisonment. “Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again” (vv. 25, 26). Paul had no divine word about his staying alive, but given his apostolic calling and the need for his ministry to the Philippians, he felt sure that he had more life ahead of him — and that they would glory not in him but in Christ Jesus.

This is the fourth sounding of the joy-note in Philippians, and the third and fourth notes bracket this passage (cf. vv. 18b, 25). Paul overflowed with joyous confidence, whatever life held for him.

Paul’s grand epigram of confidence informed everything. Let us invite

it to detonate in our souls as it did for Andrew Chong. Slowly say the seven words as Dr. Chong stacked them vertically for his family.

*For to me
to live
is Christ*

Can we say this? Do we know him? Is he in us? Have we taken up his cross?

Then we can say it from our hearts: *For — to — me — to — live — is — Christ*. And if we can say that, we can confidently embrace the five-word result:

*and
to die
is gain.*

And if we can do that, we can joyously write over our souls,

Hallelujah!

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (1:27-30)

7

Worthy Citizens

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

Shakespeare's several plays involving King Henry V begin with young Prince Henry as a vain, dissolute young man who spends his time drinking and carousing with old John Falstaff. But when Henry's father, the king, dies, Henry changes. Prince Henry realizes his unworthiness and that the crown will be his through no virtue of his own. So he confesses to his dying father: "You won it, wore it, kept it, gave it me." Then, upon the crown being given to him, Henry vows to live a worthy life:

*The tide of blood in me
Hath proudly flowed in vanity till now.
Now doth it turn and ebb back to the sea,
Where it shall mingle with the state of floods,
And flow henceforth in formal majesty.¹*

And from then on Henry V becomes one of the worthiest and noblest kings of England — his noble heritage flowed from him with majesty.

There is something of this idea in the opening lines of our text, though it may not be readily apparent. The line reads, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ" — which in effect is a call to individually say, "Let the tide of blood in me (the life of Christ) flow henceforth in formal majesty." This will become clear as we unpack the treasures of this opening line.

THE CALL TO LIVE AS WORTHY CITIZENS (v. 27A)

Citizenship. At the center of the treasure is the fact that "Only let your manner of life" under-translates the Greek, which better reads, "Only let your

manner of life *as citizens* be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The Greek verb is *politeuesthai*, which shares its root with the cognate noun *polis* or “city” as well as with another noun, *politeuma*, which is translated “citizenship” in 3:20 (“But our citizenship is in heaven”). So here in verse 27 it means “live as citizens.” Thus Paul purposely uses language evocative of citizenship because he has in mind the ultimate citizenship of the Philippians. As Gordon Fee explains, “Paul now uses the verb metaphorically, not meaning ‘live as citizens of Rome’ — although that is not irrelevant — but rather ‘live in the Roman colony of Philippi as worthy citizens of your heavenly homeland.’” Fee adds, “As Philippi was a colony of Rome in Macedonia, so the church was a ‘colony of heaven’ in Philippi, whose members were to live as its citizens in Philippi.”²

Paul could not have more carefully chosen and crafted his words to impress and encourage his Philippian brothers and sisters as they struggled in that self-consciously prideful, elitist little Roman colony that was so pre-occupied with the coveted citizenship of Rome. Here Paul challenges his beloved Philippians with a “counter-citizenship whose capital and seat of power are not earthly but heavenly, whose guarantor is not Nero but Christ” (Bockmuehl).³ The town of Philippi was enjoying the personal patronage and benefactions of Lord (*Kyrios*) Caesar, but the Philippians were subjects of the one who alone is *Kyrios* and to whom every knee (including “Lord” Nero’s) will bow.⁴

The Philippians were to live out what they were — like an unbowed African slave who towered above his manacled comrades — the son of a king, and he could not forget it! “Philippians, live out your blood-bought, heavenly citizenship.”

Gospel. The evidence of living well as citizens of Heaven is a life “worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Paul’s emphasis on worthiness can be heard in the original’s word order: “Only worthy of the gospel of Christ live as citizens.” The gospel was to be adorned by the way the Philippians lived out their heavenly citizenship. Their partnership (or fellowship) in the gospel from the first day had evoked Paul’s initial note of joy in this letter (cf. 1:4, 5). Paul and the Philippians shared a special gospel bond sealed with the adhesive of their blood, sweat, and tears.

For Paul the gospel was first! His jailhouse joy rested in the fact that the gospel went out to pagan soldiers, then through his encouraged brothers, and was even preached by his competitors who were trying to afflict him. “What then?” asked Paul. “Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (v. 18).

This gospel-first ethic was what Paul enjoined of the Philippians. There had never ever been a congenial environment for the gospel in Philippi. The little Roman *polis* declared war on Paul and his converts from day one

when the Roman lictors beat him and Silas (cf. Acts 16:22). The battle was cosmic. Those believers, as citizens of Heaven and subjects of the Lord of lords, were engaged in mortal combat. And their weapons were the good news — the preaching of Christ — and lives that proved “worthy of the gospel.”

THE DISTINCTIVES OF WORTHY CITIZENS (vv. 27B, 28)

The Philippians’ commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord was a threat to the civic-minded patriotic Romans who ran Philippi. The Philippians’ allegiance to another “Lord” than Caesar bordered on treason as it challenged the political establishment. At times Christians were tarred with the (amazing to us!) opprobrium “atheist” because their loyalty to Christ challenged the divinity of Caesar. The Roman citizens of Philippi, who customarily honored the emperor at every public gathering, pressured the church to conform. Christians were a political embarrassment with their *Kyrios* Jesus. And more, Christians who had the temerity to declare with Paul that their citizenship was in Heaven (cf. 3:20) were thought to be “un-Roman” and thus enemies to public order.⁵

Because of this there was widespread persecution in Philippi and throughout the other churches of Macedonia, about whom we have these sound bites: “a severe test of affliction . . . extreme poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:2), “in much affliction” (1 Thessalonians 1:6), “your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:4). Heavenly citizenship worthy of the gospel was costly and demanding.

Spiritual steadfastness. This demanded steadfastness, as Paul says: “so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear that you are standing firm in one spirit” (v. 27b). Here we must understand that the “one spirit” is the Holy Spirit because in every other use of this wording in Paul’s writings it refers to the Holy Spirit.⁶

Therefore the Philippians’ ability to stand firm was supernaturally based on the Holy Spirit’s work in giving them new life, indwelling them, and incorporating them into the church (cf. Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5). The Philippians were called to stand firm against attacks on the gospel as they drew on the inner work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. There is nothing here of bootstrap resolve. The Philippians were not asked to reach down deep in their inner person and will to pull themselves together. Their no! to Roman culture’s demands to compromise the gospel rested in what God had accomplished in their lives.

At the same time this standing firm in the unity of the Holy Spirit produces action. God’s great work is the ground of everything.

Teamwork. The immediate and concomitant effect of their “standing

firm in one spirit [Spirit]” that Paul called for was profound cooperation — “with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27c). “Striving side by side” is the teamwork vocabulary of athletes or soldiers. It is at the heart of winning teams. Stephen Ambrose in his book *Comrades*, which includes the story of Lewis and Clark, describes this as the secret of their epic accomplishments: “What Lewis and Clark had done, first of all, was to demonstrate that there is nothing that men cannot do if they get themselves together and act as a team.”⁷

Paul knew that the success of the church in Philippi depended on such teamwork, but, of course, the stakes were far higher than the exploration of the American West. It was “the faith of the gospel” (v. 27c). It was *the* faith — its spread and growth — everything for which Paul was spending and being spent.

Fearlessness. Living as citizens worthy of the gospel first requires that we stand together, grounded immovably in the work of the Holy Spirit, and then that we strive together side by side like athletes determined to win the game. Of course, there is more if we are to live worthily, and that is to “not [be] frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God” (v. 28). Some of us can remember high school or college athletics when we stepped onto the field or court or mat against daunting opponents and tried our best to look cool and unintimidated, hoping that would be a sign of their destruction and our victory. Of course, our opponents affected the same nonchalance and cool. The bottom line was, it didn’t make a whole lot of difference because as the event progressed they found out what we had, or more likely what we didn’t have!

But in Philippi it wasn’t a game, and the stakes were more than a win or a loss. The opponents in Philippi came both from the ranks of the Roman establishment who despised the believers’ un-Romanness and from those who found the lives of the Philippians to be living rebukes to their pagan way of life. Together these meant that the threat of violence was always there and was sometimes activated.

Certainly this was something to naturally fear. But Paul tells the Philippians to “not [be] frightened in anything by your opponents.” How could they not be afraid? The rare Greek word used here was employed elsewhere for startling horses into a stampede. It describes a panic reaction.⁸ Don’t panic, advises Paul. Keep your head. You’re a citizen of Heaven. God is in control. Don’t be intimidated.

But unlike the bravado and posturing at the onset of an athletic event, this will be “a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God” (v. 28b). This doesn’t mean that their adversaries would recognize their own doom, though they might have a dim awareness of it, but

that it is nevertheless a sign of their destruction, their judgment. Of course, believers see it all, including their own salvation. D.A. Carson explains:

Your change in character, your united stand in defense of the gospel, your ability to withstand with meekness and without fear the opposition that you must endure, constitutes a sign. That sign speaks volumes, both to the outside world and the Christian community. It is a sign of judgment against the world that is mounting the opposition; it is a sign of assurance that these believers really are the people of God and will be saved on the last day.⁹

In 1984 Mehdi Dibaj was imprisoned by the government of Iran on charges of “apostasy” for converting from Islam to Christianity. He languished in prison for ten years until his case was tried in 1994. Some of the last lines of his written defense read:

[Jesus Christ] is our Saviour and He is the Son of God. To know Him means to know eternal life. I, a useless sinner, have believed in His beloved person and all His words and miracles recorded in the Gospel, and I have committed my life into His hands. Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord. . . .

Mehdi Dibaj was sentenced to execution but was released under pressure from the U.S. State Department — only to be found dead in a Tehran park, the third Christian murdered in Iran after release from prison.¹⁰ Dibaj’s measured conduct as he calmly stood his ground for the gospel was a sure sign of his enemies’ coming judgment and his salvation, which perhaps some of those who knew him, due to God’s grace, began to see.

*The tide of blood in Mehdi Dibaj
Did flow henceforth in formal majesty.*

THE GRACE OF WORTHY CITIZENSHIP (vv. 29, 30)

The proofs that the Philippians’ courageous stand was a sign of their salvation were the twin facts that they were graced with salvation and with suffering: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (v. 29). The verb “granted” can be literally rendered “graced” because it means “to give freely or graciously as a favor.”¹¹ And the passive voice means that the twin gifts are from God.

The gracious gift of believing in Christ is a magnificent blessing. It is the

grand evidence that God looks on you with favor. “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12, 13). It is the eternal boon of God. But with this there is also another magnificent boon, as Karl Barth explains: “The grace of being permitted to *believe* in Christ is surpassed by the grace of being permitted to *suffer* for him, of being permitted to walk the way of Christ with Christ himself to the perfection of fellowship with him.”¹² The fellowship of Christ’s sufferings moves the believer beyond the role of beneficiary of Christ’s death to a sharer in his sufferings (cf. Colossians 1:24).

The suffering that comes to a Christian (as a Christian) is not a sign of God’s neglect but rather a proof that grace is at work in his or her life. As Paul would tell Timothy, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). To the Philippians, he later penned this astonishing prayer: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (3:10). This attitude wasn’t Paul’s alone because we read in Acts that after the apostles had been beaten in the presence of the council of Israel, “they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

Here, as a further word of encouragement and motivation to live as citizens “worthy of the gospel,” Paul indicated that the Philippians share in the same sufferings with him — “engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (v. 30). They and Paul together made up the heroic fellowship of the gospel (cf. 1:5), which meant that they shared in the same “conflict” (*agôn*) with Paul. Their conflict, whether in Philippi or Rome, was one. What they saw Paul endure in Philippi (and what they themselves were enduring in Philippi) along with what they heard he was enduring in Rome was all part of the apostolic *agôn*.

Paul’s point was that he and the Philippians were all recipients of grace as they had been given the gifts of salvation and suffering. Their mutual *agôn* was a testimony to the grace of God. Listen to John Calvin’s passionate application:

Oh, if this conviction were fixed in our minds, that persecutions are to be reckoned among God’s benefits, what progress would be made in the doctrine of godliness! And yet, what is more certain than that it is the highest honour of the Divine grace, that we suffer for His name either reproach, or imprisonment, or miseries, or tortures, or even death, for in that case He decorates us with His insignia. But more will be found who will order God and His gifts to be gone, rather than embrace the cross readily when it is offered to them. Woe, then, to our stupidity!¹³

The understanding that suffering and salvation are both gifts of grace is essential to discipleship and perseverance. Sadly, the misunderstanding or rejection of this has led to the spiritual demise of not a few.

The transcending call for all of us is to “Only let your manner of life [as citizens of Heaven] be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (v. 27a). We are recipients of the gospel. Our sins have been paid for by Christ himself. One day, along with Paul, we will receive “the crown of righteousness” from Christ the Lord (cf. 2 Timothy 4:8). And we will well be able to say, “You won it, wore it, kept it, gave it to me.” All glory to God!

As benefactors of the gospel, we are charged to be like Paul — gospel-first people — living lives worthy of the gospel — “standing firm in one spirit” as we are planted firm by the work of the Holy Spirit in a graced unity — “with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” as we team together in mutual support and coordination to promote the authentic gospel. This we are to do while “not [being] frightened in anything” — no panic but calm assurance. And we are to do all of this understanding that God’s grace to us includes both salvation and suffering. If we imagine grace to be only pleasant benefits and blessings, then suffering is seen to be anything but grace. And many such confused souls have walked away from God and his church and his grace.

Standing together — striving side by side — without fear — as full recipients of his dual graces of salvation and suffering — this is worthy of the gospel — this is full citizenship.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (2:1-4)

8

Living Worthily in the Church

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

When a certain church in Dallas became divided, the rift was so bitter that each side instituted a lawsuit seeking to dispossess the other from the church's property — this despite Scripture's warnings about taking such matters before public courts (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). The story, of course, hit the Dallas newspapers and garnered considerable interest from the readers. The judge wisely ruled that it was not the province of the court to decide such matters until the case had been heard before the denomination's church court. So the dispute was remanded to the ecclesiastical court where, eventually, the decision was made to award the real estate and properties to one side.

The losers withdrew and formed another church nearby. Church growth the American way! It was reported in the Dallas newspapers (no doubt with some delight) that the church court had traced the trouble to its source — the trouble began when, at a church dinner, an elder had been served a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him.¹ Church hostesses, make sure you always serve heaping elder portions to the elders and deacons or you might come before Judge Judy!

Imagine the laugh that the good people of Dallas got out of that one! Of course, this is nothing new, nor is it confined to the exotics of American church culture. Leslie Flynn in his book with the dubious title *Great Church Fights* quotes a story from a Welsh newspaper about a church that was looking for a new pastor.

Yesterday the two opposition groups both sent ministers to the pulpit. Both spoke simultaneously, each trying to shout above the other. Both

called for hymns, and the congregation sang two — each side trying to drown out the other. Then the groups began shouting at each other. Bibles were raised in anger. The Sunday morning service turned into a bedlam. Through it all, the two preachers continued to outshout each other with their sermons.

Eventually a deacon called a policeman. Two came in and began shouting for the congregation to be quiet. They advised the 40 persons in the church to return home. The rivals filed out, still arguing. Last night one of the group called a “let’s-be-friends” meeting. It broke up in argument.

The newspaper article was headlined, “Hallelujah! Two Jacks in One Pulpit.”²

Another good laugh for the good people of the UK. I’m not above smiling at the follies and absurdities of life. Both these events could make excellent sketch material for *Saturday Night Live* or British television — “Monty Python’s Flying Circus Goes to Church.”

The sad thing is that these stories actually happened and that they illustrate what is all too true — many of the gravest dangers to the church come from within. It’s always been this way. As Karl Barth piquantly remarked, “There are no letters in the New Testament apart from the problems of the church.”³ This is clearly true of the letter to the Philippians, which is one of Paul’s letters from prison, written when the dangers from without were immense.

In fact, Paul’s command that opened the preceding paragraph in 1:27, 28 referenced the external dangers and called the Philippians to “hang tough”: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.” This said, Paul knows that toughing it out in the face of external pressures will not be enough. If the Philippians are to live lives worthy of their heavenly citizenship, they must also not allow themselves to be undone from within the church.

The Philippians must be united not only against their common foes but also unified in heart and mind and in mutual regard for one another. Verses 1-4 of chapter 2 form a single sentence that is a passionate appeal for *unity* and *mutual care* within the church.

FOURFOLD MOTIVATIONS (v. 1)

Paul began with a deliberately emotional appeal that was meant to move the Philippians to a fourfold remembrance of what happened to them when they

came to Christ. “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy . . .” (v. 1). Paul hoped these sweet recollections of the supernatural in their lives would move them to do what was necessary to ensure their unity and mutuality.

His first recollection, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ,” summoned their experience of salvation when the Holy Spirit came alongside them and comforted and strengthened them. This is true of all our biographies if we have truly come to Christ. My memory as a boy was that I received a treasury of consolation and strength. Being in Christ and knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that Christ was in me exceeded mere “atta boy!” encouragement as we normally think of it. I was consoled, and I was strengthened in Christ.

Paul’s second recollection, “any comfort from love,” referenced their experience of Christ’s love. They realized that they were loved unconditionally by Christ who gave his life for them. This is the love we sing about — the “love that will not let me go” — the lyrical consolations that ring from our souls in salvation. Every child of God understands this love. I well remember the new sense of security I felt as I drifted off to sleep.

The third recollection was “any participation in the Spirit.” This is the *koinon* word, the *fellowship* word that is so embedded in the argument of Philippians, first appearing in 1:5 where Paul celebrated the Philippians’ “partnership [fellowship] in the gospel.” This fellowship in the Spirit came when, as Paul explained, “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). And now it rests as the lingering, final word of the sublime Trinitarian benediction that we repeatedly invoke: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). This is the enduring reality of our lives — fellowship in the Spirit.

The fourth recollection — “any affection and sympathy” — is more exactly the divine compassion and mercy that came from Christ himself to us at salvation and now passes through us to others. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7), indicating that a merciful heart is a sign of having received mercy. Compassion and mercy flow in the lives of those who have experienced them.

Paul is so emotionally compelling here. He has taken the Philippians back to the graced memories of the supernatural work of Christ in their souls at salvation. He has activated their spiritual camcorders. They all had experienced encouragement and comfort in Christ. They remembered the consolation of Christ’s love when they became his. They, through Christ, had found fellowship in the Spirit. And the compassion and sympathy of Christ

had not only graced their souls but had flowed from them to others. Thus, with all of this freshly replaying on their inner screens, the Philippians must heed the exhortation through their beloved apostle to maintain unity and mutual care in the church. And so must we. This is necessary if we are to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

LIVING WORTHILY: UNITY (v. 2)

As to unity, Paul says, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (v. 2). This is, in short, a dynamic unity of mind. Note that the thought begins with the words “the same mind” and ends with the words “of one mind,” both of which speak of a life intent on a unified purpose — a single goal. And what is the unified goal? The gospel! Paul mentioned the gospel five times in the first chapter, and in the fifth mention (verse 27) he declared, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel,” which is the commanding theme all the way to 2:18. So the call here in 2:2 to be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” is a plea that the Philippians be “gospel oriented as they relate to and care for one another.”⁴

So the unity that Paul emotionally enjoins, by recalling the supernatural realities that the Philippians experienced when they received the gospel, is that they themselves be gospel-oriented men and women. How informing! The unity Paul wants is not a vacuous togetherness but a oneness fraught with dynamic purpose. This is important instruction for the church universal. It is cliché today to say that “the purpose of the church is worship” without understanding that if the gospel of Christ is not the center of everything (the unifying purpose), it is not New Testament worship. So if we attempt to take Paul seriously, the gospel must be in the center of our thinking and at every level of ministry.

Paul was so passionate about this that he cared little about himself as long as the church was getting it right. Though he was in prison on a capital charge, chained, guarded 24/7, afflicted by those who should be his friends, with execution at hand, he rested his joy in Christ and the gospel and insisted that his joy would be “complete” if they lived out their unity in the gospel. That’s all the happiness Paul sought! Paul knew that a people so unified in purpose would not be concerned with who gets the extra biscuit at a church dinner. He knew that to be gospel-oriented is to be others-oriented.

LIVING WORTHILY: MUTUAL CARE (vv. 3, 4)

Paul was explicit about mutual care within the church: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (v. 3).

Humility/lowliness. “Rivalry” and “conceit” have always been part and parcel of the world and its systems. In the secular Greek literature of Jesus’ day the words *humility* and *lowliness* were rarely used, and if they were used, it was in a derogatory sense of servile weakness or obsequious groveling or shameful lowliness.⁵

Conceit has definitely been more in vogue over the centuries. The seventeenth-century Frenchman Comte Aimery de La Rochefoucauld was noted for his aristocratic conceit. On one occasion, disgusted by the improper protocol in a certain household, he said to a friend of his own peerage, “Let us walk home together and talk of rank.” And then speaking of the Duc du Luynes he remarked that his family was “mere nobodies in the year 1000.”⁶ Rousseau said, “I rejoice in myself. My consolations lie in my self esteem. . . . If there were a single enlightened government in Europe, it would have erected statues to me.”⁷ Egoism was seen across the channel too in the likes of Oscar Wilde who, when asked as he went through customs if he had anything to declare, answered, “Only my genius.” Conceit is *de jure* in the world system. Conventional wisdom has it that you can’t get anywhere without it. And there is some truth in that. But it is an abomination in the church.

The rule for the gospel-oriented church is, “but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Several years ago I preached at Southern Seminary in Louisville. After the sermon I asked the president, Al Mohler, about A. T. Robertson, the famous Greek scholar. Robertson was the towering genius and masterful scholar of his day, as the nearly 1,400 pages of his *Grammar of the Greek New Testament* testifies. He was also the son-in-law of John A. Broadus, New Testament scholar and one of the founding professors of the seminary. Mohler offered to take me to A. T. Robertson’s grave and drove me to the Cave-Hill Cemetery grave site.

But first he pointed me to Broadus’s grave, a towering monument erected by his relatives. As I gazed up at its granite inscription, he directed my attention down to a flat grave marker next to it — that of the great A. T. Robertson. Mohler remarked, “Robertson wanted to be buried in Broadus’s shadow.”

That is a beautiful sentiment. And whatever the realities of their relationship, it remains a remarkable expression of Paul’s directive, “but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” The lowliness that was utterly despised by the Greeks and makes such little sense today has become the highest virtue for the child of God. Markus Bockmuehl writes:

Instead of pursuing their own prestige, that strangely addictive and debasing cocktail of vanity and public opinion, the Philippians are called to humility (*tapeinophrosune*), the ‘lowliness of heart’ which agrees to treat and think of others preferentially. . . . The biblical view of humility is pre-

cisely *not* feigned or groveling, nor a sanctimonious or pathetic lack of self-esteem, but rather a mark of moral strength and integrity. It involves an unadorned acknowledgement of one's own creaturely inadequacies, and entrusting one's fortunes to God rather than to one's own abilities or resources.⁸

If we wonder how a person of superior abilities can regard others as more significant than himself or herself, the answer is to use those abilities for self-assessment by the light of the Scriptures. Then take to heart the words of the surpassing genius and Christian Blaise Pascal, who concluded after much thought, "what amazes me most is to see that everyone is not amazed at his weakness."⁹ In the words of St. Chrysostom, "There is nothing so foreign to a Christian as arrogance."¹⁰ When we actually see ourselves for what we are, our conceit and vainglory will recede, and we will begin to count others more significant than ourselves.

This is in fact the way Paul himself lived, as he earlier explained to the Corinthians: "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:33 — 11:1); and "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (1 Corinthians 10:24). This is living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Others-directed. Paul gives this others-oriented call classic expression in verse 4: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Looking to the interests of others is at the heart of all godly parenting. This is what our godly mothers and fathers did, and we parents are called to live it out every day. No one can effectively parent who is into himself or herself. And friendship only flourishes in the flow of others-directedness, as the story of Jonathan and David's friendship poignantly reminds us.

As to Paul's great concern here, a healthy church that will survive the onslaught of a hostile and fracturing culture must be a place where each one looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." In such a church every portion served at a church dinner will be "just right" regardless of the size, and only one Jack will be in the pulpit at a time. Hallelujah!

The conductor of a symphony orchestra was once asked what is the most difficult instrument to play. He responded, "Second violin. I can find plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play second violin with enthusiasm — that is a problem. And if we have no second violin, we have no harmony."

*It takes more grace than I can tell
To play the second fiddle well."*

Paul's signature command — "Only let your manner of life [as citizens of Heaven] be worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27) — demanded that the Philippians both stand firm against the onslaughts from *outside* the church and attacks from *within* the church. As to the latter, the church will live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" when it has a unified focus on the gospel so that its people are "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." This gospel-oriented unity will then show itself in care for others — counting others more significant than themselves and looking out for the interests of others.

Paul was not captive to the neo-pagan proposition that we cannot love others until we love ourselves.¹² Certainly he didn't hate himself. In fact Paul's theology celebrated the fact that Christ loved him and gave himself for Paul (cf. Galatians 2:20) and that he, and all Christians, were not only loved but had been given all things (cf. Romans 8:32).

Therefore the source of Paul's call to live lives worthy of the gospel through unity in the church and in other-directedness *is Christ himself*— this is all possible for those who are "in Christ," a truth Paul celebrates with this matchless charge:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:5-11)

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (2:5-8)

9

The Self-Humiliation of Christ

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

The Apostle Matthew reports that toward the end of Jesus' ministry an ugly, competitive spirit developed among the apostles when James and John and their mother attempted to get Jesus to promise them privileged thrones in the kingdom. "When the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers" (20:24). Harsh words and angry gestures were exchanged among the Twelve. Tempers flared! So Jesus called them together and said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (vv. 25-28)

It would seem that none could miss the point. However, as we all know, hearing the truth and making it part of our lives are not the same thing, even when we are devoted to Christ. Several days later, when the apostles arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, they were still going at it. Peter and John had secured a room for Passover as Jesus had directed, but they had neglected to make arrangements for foot-washing. And as the apostles wandered in, no one would condescend to perform the humble task. Jesus' teaching (only a few days earlier), as direct as it was, had apparently had no effect. No one would volunteer for the lowly task. How very human they were. How like us.

As John's Gospel relates the account of what happened behind closed doors, the disciples were reclining at the table with their shamefully dirty feet stretching out behind them. The meal was in process, but the conversation was strained because of the tension. What a pleasant way to eat Passover! Then they became aware that the Teacher had risen from supper and was standing apart from them. As they watched he removed his outer garment. Next he took a towel and wrapped it around his body. And then he poured water into a basin and began slowly to move around the circle, washing each disciple's outstretched feet, wiping them with the towel with which he was wrapped.¹

It was a breathtaking deed. The Midrash taught that no Hebrew, even a slave, could be commanded to wash feet.² Yet Jesus did it in the most humble way possible, clothed in a servant's towel. In the breathless silence of that upper room, the apostles heard the trickle of water as it was poured, the friction of the towel as their feet were wiped off, the sound of the Master breathing as he moved from one to another. The incarnate Son, God himself, had dressed like a servant and washed the feet of his prideful, arrogant creatures. Then he said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (John 13:14-16).

Jesus used the ancient logic, "If it is true for the greater (me), then it must be true for the lesser (you)." That is always a powerful argument. But coming from his infinitude, it is infinitely compelling. Yet, so often divine logic and compulsion stall in our hearts because we are so like the men at Jesus' table. In the words of poet Robert Raines:

*I am like James and John
 Lord, I size up other people
 in terms of what they can do for me;
 how they can further my program,
 feed my ego,
 satisfy my needs,
 give me strategic advantage.
 I exploit people,
 ostensibly for your sake,
 but really for my own sake.
 Lord, I turn to you
 to get the inside track
 and obtain special favors,
 your direction for my schemes,
 your power for my projects,*

*your sanction for my ambitions,
your blank checks for whatever I want.
I am like James and John.³*

Given our natural bent to be self-centered, it has always been difficult to live out Christ's directive — as Paul advises the Philippians in our present text, to “[do] nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (2:3, 4). Humility and others-directedness are hard for us. We find it difficult in our most important relationships both in the home and in the household of faith.

And here in Philippians, as Paul calls God's people to live a “life . . . worthy of the gospel” (1:27), he turns to the ultimate example of Christ and his self-humiliation in 2:5-11, the theological, Christological centerpiece and jewel of the book. Many consider it the most exalted prose in the New Testament. One scholar has likened it to “the soaring, unanswerable language of a Bach cantata which is best understood by being heard out to the end — and then heard again.”⁴ And certainly it does serve us in this way. When we read and reread this passage, it takes us down in Christ's humiliation and then up in soaring exaltation. We will now consider the first movement in verses 5-8 — the preexistent Christ's self-humiliation — as an example for our hearts.

Paul begins, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” — literally, “Think this among yourselves, which also in Christ Jesus” (v. 5). Paul's concern for the Philippians was not so much for their minds as it was for their interactions (for the whole congregation), that they would live out in their mutual relationships the same humble attitude that characterized Jesus⁵ — “Have this mind *among yourselves*.” So as we take up the mind of Christ, it is “not for the satisfaction of our curiosity, but for the reformation of our lives” (Motyer).⁶

CHRIST'S HUMILITY IN HEAVEN (v. 6)

Our Savior's humility in Heaven is described explicitly — “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6).

His existence. Christ existed in the majestic “form of God” from all eternity as he shared in the glory of God. Jesus alluded to this in the Upper Room in his high-priestly prayer on the eve of his death: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). Calvin comments, “The form of God means here his majesty. For as man is known by the appearance of his form, so the majesty which shines forth in God is His figure.”⁷ The glory that Christ had before the world may seem unreal to our unreflective, distracted souls, but the reality behind these words is beyond our comprehension. We declare

creedally that he is “Light of Light” as we reach for some expression of the glorious reality, but we know little of what we declare. This is among the persistent challenges in reading about Christ — to allow our minds to dwell upon the incomprehensible realities of his person so that our understanding is progressively elevated and our hearts are enlarged.

At the same time “form of God” does not refer simply to his external appearance, but to his being. Hebrews 1:3 tells us, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” Note that Christ is not a mere *reflector* of God’s glory. He is “the radiance,” the one who radiates the glory of God! He shines forth his own essential glory along with that of the Father and the Spirit in the mystery of the Trinity.

His attitude. Here the wonder increases because of his eternal humility in Heaven. Though he existed in the splendorous “form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6b). The idea is that he did not hold on to his equality with God as something to use for his own advantage.⁸ Here we need to look back to verses 3, 4 — to Christians who vie as rivals as they seek their own interests. How unlike such people was the pre-incarnate Christ. Rather than viewing his equality with God as something to keep, he saw it as qualifying him for his humble descent to save his people.

Christ’s eternal humility in Heaven is a thing of astonishing wonder.

CHRIST’S HUMILITY IN INCARNATION (v. 7)

Christ’s humility in Heaven is next followed by his humility in incarnation — “but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (v. 7).

His emptying. The phrase “but made himself nothing” gives the proper metaphorical sense of the Greek, which actually reads, “but emptied himself.” During the early part of the twentieth century liberal theologians abused the meaning of this text by developing the *kenosis* theory (the title coming from the Greek word *kenao*, which means “to empty”). They thought that when Christ emptied himself, he ceased to be God or stripped himself of his attributes.

Today this theory is discredited by virtually all scholars of every persuasion. This is because four of the five uses of the verb “to empty” in the New Testament are metaphorical. Moreover, the emptying (or “making himself nothing”) is defined by the following two phrases of verse 7 — namely, “taking the form of a servant” and “being born in the likeness of men.”⁹ The negative action of emptying is actually defined by Christ’s positive action in the Incarnation.

Emptying by taking — “taking the form of a servant.” Here the word “form” has the same sense as in verse 6, where “form” signifies both the *appearance* and the *being* of God. So when Christ took on the “form of a servant [slave],” he adopted the *appearance* and *being* of a slave. This taking on

was an emptying, as Christ so dramatically demonstrated when he stripped himself in the Upper Room and washed the disciples' feet. Christ did not *exchange* the form of God for the form of a slave. Rather he *manifested* the form of God in the form of a slave.¹⁰

Emptying by being born. The other phrase that further defines his emptying — “being born in the likeness of men” — describes his full identity with the human race. He fully participated in our human experience. Jesus was truly man, but not merely man.¹¹ Christ's eternal humility in Heaven is a thing of astounding wonder — Christ never *became* humble because he *was* humble. He is the genesis and apotheosis of humility. And beyond that, his humility in the Incarnation is a thing of even greater wonder.

I remember from my boyhood my pastor sometimes reciting at Christmas J. B. Phillips's fanciful dialogue, “The Angels' Point of View.” In an imaginary conversation a very young angel was being shown the splendors and glories of the universe by a senior and experienced angel.

The little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of interstellar space, and to his mind there seemed to be an awful lot of it all. Finally, he was shown the galaxy of which our planetary system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

“I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

“Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel.

“What's special about that one?”

“That,” replied his senior solemnly, “is the Visited Planet.”

“‘Visited’?” said the little one. “You don't mean visited by —”

“Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and not perhaps overclean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory.”

And at these words he bowed his head reverently.¹²

From there, Phillips leads the junior angel through a series of revelations about Christ's incarnation that leaves him stunned and incredulous. Oh, to have fresh eyes and a tender heart as we revisit these astonishing truths — to live our lives in a spiritual springtime of wonder — to be perpetually knocked out by the realities of Christ!

Now the wonder deepens even more as Paul recounts Christ's self-humiliation in death.

CHRIST'S HUMILITY IN DEATH (v. 8)

The descent bottoms out: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." His "human form" or more exactly his human shape was that of the visible appearance of a man. Those who saw Christ saw him as a man.

He fully identified himself with humanity. He was not a facsimile (cf. Luke 2:52; John 1:14; Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:4; Colossians 1:22; Hebrews 2:17; 4:15; 5:7, 8; 1 John 4:2, 3).¹³

His self-humbling. As a real man, "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death" (v. 8a). Note: no one humbled him! "He humbled *himself*." Kierkegaard commented on this verse:

Christ humbled *himself* — *not*, he *was* humbled. O infinite sublimity, of which it must categorically be true that there was none in heaven or on earth or in the abyss that could humble him! He humbled himself. The infinite qualitative difference between Christ and every other man lies indeed in this, that in every humiliation which he suffers it is absolutely necessary that he himself should assent and confirm that he is willing to submit to that humiliation. This is infinite superiority over suffering, but at the same time also suffering infinitely more intense in kind.¹⁴

So at every level, his humbling was his own doing.

*His not holding tightly to his equality with God —
his emptying —
his becoming a servant in body and soul —
his full entrance into humanity —
his humbling — were all of his own doing.*

The message for the Philippians and all the rest of us who are prone to ambition and vainglory is clear: "in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (vv. 3, 4). "He is lowly minded who humbles himself, not he who is lowly by necessity" (Chrysostom).¹⁵

Christ's self-humiliation brought ultimate obedience — "by becoming obedient to the point of death" (v. 8b). So we see Christ in Gethsemane overcome with fear because he knew what his death would entail — his becoming sin for us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). He knew that he must propitiate the wrath of God (cf. 1 John 2:2). Thus we hear him say in the garden,

“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mark 14:34). “And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:43, 44). Jesus prayed, “‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless not my will, but yours be done’” (v. 42). His self-humiliation meant full obedience.

His death. And then he died the most scandalous of deaths — “even death on a cross” (v. 8c). Humanity had not created a more degrading or loathsome experience than this. Polite Roman society considered the mention of the cross to be an obscenity.¹⁶ In fact, this may account for the relatively late appearance of the cross as a Christian symbol.¹⁷ What sort of person would wear an obscenity as a necklace? “Even death on a cross” is the crowning shudder and an expression of humble obedience. Calvin remarks, “For by dying in this way He was not only covered with ignominy in the sight of men, but also accursed in the sight of God. It is assuredly such an example of humility as ought to absorb the attention of all men; it is impossible to explain it in words suitable to its greatness.”¹⁸ The humblest man who ever lived is Christ himself, the God-man.

Think of it:

- He was eternally humble in Heaven: “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6).
- He was astonishingly self-humbling in the Incarnation: “but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (v. 7).
- He was infinitely self-humbling in his death: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (v. 8).

What does Paul make of this plunging, self-humbling of Christ? Only this: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (vv. 3-5). This is the divine call for everyone in the body of Christ. This is the path for living a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Serving others is to be the vocation of every Christian, poor or rich. Counting others as more significant than ourselves is to be the constant and sincere attitude of our souls. Looking out for the interests of others is to be descriptive of all who are part of the body of Christ. Jesus said:

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.” (John 13:14-16)

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:9-11)*

10

Christ's Super-Exaltation

PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11

There is a sense in which Christ wore the servant's towel from eternity because as the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world, he was eternally determined to redeem us (cf. Revelation 13:8). So we see that Christ's downward self-humiliation was due to his eternal resolve. First, there was *his humility in Heaven* — “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6). Rather, Christ viewed his equality with God as qualifying him for his humble descent to save his people. Second, there was *his humility in incarnation* — “but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (v. 7). Jesus fully identified with the human race and donned a towel as he took on the appearance and being of a slave. And, third, there was *his humility in death* — “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (v. 8). Nothing could be lower. He became a shame and scandal for us!

And it was all his own doing. No one humbled him! Herod did not humble him. Pilate did not humble him. The high priest did not humble him. The Romans did not humble him. Jesus “humbled himself.” The humblest man who ever lived is Christ himself, the God-man. No other man or woman has even come close!

Of course, as we know from the flow of the text, Christ's self-humiliation was followed by his grand exaltation by God the Father. So the down, down, down of Christ's humiliation is followed by his soaring exaltation. To get the feel of this, picture the gears of a catapult being ratcheted down ever tighter with the three movements of his self-humiliation, so that the final

groaning click of the gears creates an explosive tension, and then the gear is tripped, launching indescribable exaltation.

Christ's exaltation (his catapult upward) has two movements: his *past* exaltation and his *future* exaltation.

GOD'S PAST EXALTATION OF CHRIST (v. 9)

The exaltation that Christ now enjoys stretches our understanding as it is expressed in verse 9: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name."

Super-exaltation. This is the ultimate illustration of Jesus' own axiom, delivered to those full of religious pride, "The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11, 12). In keeping with his own spiritual law, Jesus' self-humiliation brought about his supreme exaltation.

Though Christ's exaltation was a once-and-for-all event, it was the culmination of a process that began with the resurrection. He had gone down, down, down through his incarnation and passion and death (which wrought such infinite spiritual compression), but then in a final, explosive upsurge the grave could no longer hold him. Thus we have that brilliant moment on Sunday morning when Jesus came right through his graveclothes in the sacred body of his humiliation, glorious and radiant. And in the following moments, says Matthew, "there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (Matthew 28:2). *Look, world — Jesus has risen from the dead!* The great message of the resurrection is that he lives!

Following Jesus' resurrection he was on earth for forty days, repeatedly appearing and ministering especially to his apostles. On day forty he led them out to Bethany, "and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50, 51). The great message of the ascension is that Jesus has gone back to Heaven and will return again in like manner, as the angels explained to the apostles: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

Jesus' resurrection and ascension were capped by his exaltation to the right hand of God the Father (cf. Acts 2:33). There he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, where he now rules (cf. Hebrews 1:3). The great message of Christ's exaltation is that he reigns!

The Scriptures contain no account of the moment of his exaltation when the glory that he had with the Father "before the world existed" was restored to him (cf. John 17:5). Perhaps this is because it is beyond description. What joy! What triumph! We know now that Christ is in Heaven with myriads of angels singing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power

and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12). Were there cosmic fireworks at Christ’s exaltation? Astral explosions? Starbursts? We do not know. Certainly there was awesome fan-fare and unrestrained celebration as the eternal Son reentered the glory that had always been his.

And here in Philippians Paul pulls out all the stops, using a word found nowhere else in the New Testament, as he says literally “Therefore God *super-exalted* him” (v. 9a). Christ received the highest exaltation. This is incomprehensible. It is in a class by itself.

The awesome retrospect is that Christ’s humiliation eventuated in his resurrection, his ascension, and now his super-exaltation and rule as he reigns forever. This is theological-historical fact.

His name. The parallel and complementary component of Christ’s super-exaltation is that he now has a new name because God has “bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (v. 9b). As we know, Christ Jesus has a lot of names. To highlight a few, he is called Immanuel, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, the Almighty, Ancient of Days, the Door, the Chief Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, the Word, the Light, the Lamb, the Bread of Life, the Rock, the Bridegroom, and the Alpha and Omega.¹ So what, then, is the mysterious name in Philippians 2?

The clue lies in the fact that it is “above every name.” It is greater than any other name conferred on Jesus. In fact, it is God’s own name *kyrios* (Lord), which was used in the Greek Old Testament to represent Yahweh, the personal name of the God of Israel.² The name given to Jesus that is above every name is indeed Yahweh, God’s name, which fills so much of the Old Testament. How can we be sure? Verse 11 identifies Jesus as “Lord” (*kyrios*), Yahweh³ — “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Giving Jesus the name “Lord” (Yahweh) is the ultimate of all honors because he says in Isaiah 42:8, “I am the LORD [Yahweh]; that is my name.” It is no one else’s name. Yahweh is the name that trumps all other titles — the awesome covenant name of the God of Israel — “the name that is above every name.”

Does this suggest that God’s Son, who is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity, experienced in his incarnation and death an increase in power and authority above that which he had before his humiliation? Absolutely not. Nothing could be higher than his being in “the form of God” (v. 6) and sharing “equality with God” (v. 6). Therefore the terms “super-exalted” and “the name that is above every name” must be understood as referring “to a position of recognizable superiority over all creation” and that Jesus’ “resurrection and ascension to the Father’s right hand make his superiority more fully evident to the creation over which he rules” (Thielman).⁴ Jesus’ super-exaltation and surpassing new name was a gain

in *official* glory, not in *essential* glory.⁵ The fact is, before his ascension Jesus gathered his disciples together and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18).

What a moment it must have been those 2,000 years ago when Jesus entered Heaven and Paradise — to super-exaltation and a new name!

GOD’S FUTURE EXALTATION OF CHRIST (vv. 10, 11)

As wondrous as Christ’s past and present exaltation is, the Father of glory has ordained further future exaltation for his Son — “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 10, 11). The scope and force of this declaration comes from its being an echo of Isaiah 45:23, which is Yahweh’s declaration that all will worship him: “By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.”” Here in Philippians 2:10, 11 Paul applies this to Jesus.

As to how dynamic Paul’s application is, we must understand that the forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah is the Old Testament’s most forthright and forceful statement of God’s sovereign rule in history and salvation. Four times in Isaiah 45 the Lord declares his absolute sovereignty. Three times he says, “I am the LORD [Yahweh], and there is no other” (vv. 5, 6, 18), and once he says, “For I am God (*El*), and there is no other” (v. 22). And it is with this fourth declaration of sovereignty that we have Yahweh’s call for utter allegiance: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.”” (vv. 22, 23).

Thus we can’t miss Paul’s connection: Jesus is the “LORD” (Yahweh) of Isaiah 45, and because Yahweh is his “name above every name,” “at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord [Yahweh], to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10, 11). What a dazzling revelation! And what an answer to the liberal theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who rejected the God of the Old Testament in preference for the God of the New Testament. Paul teaches us that Jesus is the sovereign God of *both* Testaments!

Every knee. “Every knee . . . in heaven and on earth and under the earth” refers to every rational being in the universe. “In heaven” signifies angelic beings. “On earth” designates earthly inhabitants, human beings. And “under the earth” refers to dead human beings and fallen spirits. No knee in the universe is excluded, be it human, angelic, or demonic. This means that some

will bow with spontaneous ecstasy, and others with grudging mourning and shame.

The certainty of this was sealed with Yahweh's oath in Isaiah 45:23: "By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'"" So, regardless of your spiritual state, regardless of your will, however steely and proud it may be, you will bow your knee to Jesus. The only question is, when? How much better to do it now!

Every tongue. Confession with the tongue is the spoken counterpart to bowing the knee. So Paul concludes, "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (v. 11). Remarkably, the threefold declaration "Jesus Christ is Lord" is apostolic shorthand for the gospel (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:5; cf. Romans 10:9).

First, "*Jesus*" (meaning "the Lord saves"), the name given to the Son of God at his incarnation, signifies that the Lord's salvation came when Jesus was born. This is why Simeon swept baby Jesus into his arms and declared, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29, 30). Second, the title "*Christ*" (meaning "the Anointed," "the Messiah") speaks of his being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy — "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4). Third, "*Lord*" is here understood to represent the divine name Yahweh, which is a public declaration of his sovereignty — "I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:5, 6, 18; cf. 45:14, 22).⁶

This gospel triad, "Jesus Christ is Lord," is what we confess today when we gather for worship and confession. That is a shadow and anticipation of what will be ultimately offered by all the universe. Soon every tongue of every rational being in all creation will confess that Jesus Messiah is Yahweh! Every believing heart will cry it at the top of its lungs in voice and song, and we, with the angels, will do it over and over for all eternity. Every unbelieving heart will confess it too, in dismal submission and despair. Even Satan will do it. His knee and his tongue will not be excluded. Every fallen spirit will do it. Legion upon legion will do it. Caiaphas will confess that Jesus Messiah is Yahweh. Herod will do it. Pilate will do it. Nero will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Hitler will do it. Stalin will do it. Every soul from every age will confess that Jesus Messiah is Yahweh.

And this lordship of Christ Jesus will all be "to the glory of God the Father." Jesus' sovereign lordship was the Father's plan from the beginning. He super-exalted his Son and conferred upon him his own incomparable name. Jesus' lordship reveals God's glory as eternal Father, the Father of Christ.⁷

What are we to make of this astonishing Christology, this elegant nuanced theology of Christ?

Obviously it is meant to help us understand, in broad contours, Christ's self-humiliation and then his super-exaltation by God the Father. We are to understand that Jesus' self-humiliation began in Heaven when he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v. 6). Then his self-humiliation moved further downward in his incarnation when he emptied himself by becoming a man and a servant. His self-humiliation reached the lowest point possible when he became obedient to death on the cross, a scandalous death.

Christ's self-humiliation was followed by his divine exaltation when God the Father super-exalted him to incomparable heights where he continues to reign, bearing the Father's own name that is above every name — Yahweh, Lord! Furthermore, there is a time yet coming when every knee of every rational being in the universe will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Messiah is Yahweh to the glory of God the Father. It is important that these contours cycle and recycle through our minds, so that they become part of our perpetual regard of Christ.

But even more, it is of eternal importance that we believe them with all of our hearts. These thoughts are not the wild notions of Paul's rabbinic imagination, nor are they the playground of theologians. This is what Christ Jesus truly did for you and me. His self-humiliation really did happen — only it was far more wrenching than we can imagine. And likewise his super-exaltation is beyond wonder. Yet all of this is true and demands our belief. We must not simply think that we believe it. We must in fact believe it! Why? Because what we believe about Christ is the most important thing about us, and because what we believe about him determines the way in which we live. Do you believe what Paul teaches about Christ in Philippians 2:5-11?

This said, there is something else — Paul gave this stunning example of Christ's humiliation and exaltation to motivate the Philippian church to "do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (vv. 3, 4). In fact, this concern extends to later in the chapter where Paul remarks about Timothy, "For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (vv. 20, 21). So we must understand that counting others as more significant than ourselves and looking out for the interests of others is directly related to what we understand about Christ and what we believe he did. We are, in fact, commanded to have the mind among ourselves that is in Christ Jesus (cf. v. 5).

Others first is both a sign that the gospel is well among us and a necessity for the health of the church. Others-directedness encapsulates the role

of a good husband as defined in Ephesians 5. He counts his wife as more significant than himself and looks out for her interests before his. In fact, he dies for her and loves her flesh like he loves his own body. His soul is a thermometer monitoring the Fahrenheit of her soul. Others-directedness practically defines the role of parent, producing protective fathers and nurturing mothers who regard their children as more important than themselves.

In the church, others first effectively defines the role of pastors and elders. As Peter describes it:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3; cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-16)

Others-directedness is meant to characterize the exchange within the body of Christ between brothers and sisters. We really are to regard each other as more important than ourselves. We really are to look out for the interests of others.

And we can do that because we have the example of Christ, who really did it. And we have his mind.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. (2:12-18)

11

On Common Salvation

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

The downward compression of Christ's self-humiliation followed by the explosive upward vault of his super-exaltation demands our awed contemplation. We do our souls well to meditate upon the measured descent of his downward steps: his humility in Heaven, his humiliation in the Incarnation, and his humiliation in death. Our Savior really did this. He was not play-acting. Nothing could be lower than his "death, even death on a cross" (v. 8b).

We will do our souls yet more good by contemplating his present super-exaltation, wherein he has been given the name "Lord" (Yahweh), a "name that is above every name" (v. 9), which will eventuate in his future exaltation when, at the name of Jesus, every knee in the universe will bow, "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (v. 11b). We will all be there (no exceptions!), and we will join every intelligent being in the universe in the full confession and contemplation that Jesus is Christ (Messiah) and the Lord (Yahweh). What a grace it is to be able to contemplate this even now as believers.

The grandeur of all of this is stunning. And knowing how Paul often follows theology with doxology, we might expect a song of praise or a glorious benediction. But not this time, because Paul has raised this high Christology with an eye to ground-level practicality, as is evidenced by the immediate "Therefore" of verse 12 that references everything that preceded in chapter 2. In effect Paul says, "You have heard me call you to humbly count others more important than yourselves and to look out for the interests of others (cf. vv. 3, 4). You have just heard me describe the example of the one who lived this out in his humiliation and the divine approval in his exaltation (cf. vv. 5-11). Now I am going to give you more explicit direc-

tives as to how you must live — “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (vv. 12b, 13).

WORK OUT YOUR COMMON SALVATION (vv. 12, 13)

From boyhood this has been one of my favorite Scriptures, which I mentally filed alongside the encouraging words of Philippians 1:6, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” In 1:6 I found confidence in God’s work in my individual life, and here in 2:12, 13 I was powerfully challenged to give close attention to my personal conduct as I lived out my salvation in Christ.

I have also experienced much good from these texts together. From boyhood I have rightly believed that God would complete his work of grace in my life. And from boyhood I have believed that I must carefully work out my own salvation. Further, I have correctly understood that this was not a matter of synergism between me and God, in which he did his part and I did mine, and together we saved me! I clearly understood that everything was and is from God.

But what I did not see through my highly individualized lens is that this text with its command, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” does not refer primarily to the salvation of individual believers but to working out our salvation within the church, the body of Christ. The application of this text is first *corporate* (how the church must conduct itself) and then *individual*. This is a *both/and* text that focuses first on the communal conduct of the church, which, of course, includes individual behavior. The challenge to “work out your own salvation” to the Philippians was both to all of them as a body and to each of them as its members.

Our work. That Paul’s appeal is to the community of faith in Philippi is evident in his opening words: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed . . .” The beloved Philippians, in fact, had been in the fellowship of the gospel from the initial day of their salvation to the present (cf. 1:5). And their obedience was not to Paul but to Christ and the gospel. It was “the obedience of faith,” as Paul calls it in Romans, which comes from the gospel (see 1:5; 16:26; cf. 15:18).¹ Paul’s beloved Philippians had a long history of obedience to Christ and the gospel. And now that some problems had arisen, he urged them to demonstrate their Christian obedience even more in his absence by working out their own salvation with fear and trembling as they attended to the problems.

Their attention to difficulties within the body was to be a matter of great reverence. Christ’s super-exaltation meant that they, along with the whole universe, will one day not only confess him but give account for their conduct. Clearly, the responsibilities of Christian obedience and mem-

bership in Christ's body are not casual matters. The very sound of the Greek words for "fear and trembling" (*phobos* and *tromos*) are evocative of the tremulous awe that God demands as the church works out its own salvation.

God's work. But as awesome as our call to work out our own salvation is, we are not left to our own devices, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (v. 13). We know from common experience that there are two aspects to every conscious action: the hidden *will* and the outward *work*. But God does more than merely strengthen our willing and doing. Paul's explanation goes deeper. "God himself is working in us both to will and to act: he works in us at the level of our wills and at the level of our doing" (Carson).² God works *in* us, not merely *with* us. Again, the thought of synergism (my work plus God's work gets it done) shrinks the scope of what God actually does within us. The suggestion of synergism in this text is theologically absurd.

Pascal's approving quotation of Augustine will help our thinking along. Augustine wrote, "Our deeds are our own, because of the free will producing them, and they are also God's, because of his grace causing our free will to produce them." And he says elsewhere, "God makes us do what he pleases by making us desire what we might not desire."³ The work that God does in us "both *to will* and *to work* for his good pleasure" (emphasis added) is expansive and complete. Further, his "good pleasure" is, by virtue of his love for us, our great good. And here, in respect to the Philippian church, what pleases God is an end to the dissensions among them.

Paul's magnificent "therefore" sentence of verses 12, 13 is meant to be sweetly motivational: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." What an incentive this was to this beloved church to carry on.

HOW TO WORK OUT YOUR COMMON SALVATION (vv. 14-18)

Paul cuts to the chase with a second command that tells the Philippians in no uncertain terms what is crucial to their obedience in working out their own salvation: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning" (v. 14).

Don't be complainers. Paul's mention of murmuring and questioning conjures up the pathetic grouching and whining of ancient Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exodus 16:12). And his words are intentionally vivid. "Grumbling" (*goggusmon*) is an onomatopoeic word that sounds like what it means (you can hear the muffled complaints in the repetition of this word), and "questioning" (*dialogismon*) evokes to our English-speaking ears the petty dialoguing that calls everything into question. This is not a pretty picture.

Moreover, the allusion to the wilderness episode tells us that the complaints were by and large toward the leadership. This may be why “overseers” and “deacons” are “mysteriously singled out” in Paul’s introduction to the letter (cf. 1:1).⁴ Perhaps such criticisms were the animus of the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche (cf. 4:2).

In any event, as Markus Bockmuehl astutely says, “These things, then, are not minor blemishes of morality, peripheral human weaknesses in an otherwise flawless Christian spectacle. Instead, they are part of what marks the watershed of the Christian life.”⁵

Critical, complaining spirits are the historic bane of the church from Philippi to Peoria to Philadelphia. They are found in every culture, like the nineteenth-century Scots who went to church to see if the gospel *was* preached. Or today’s McChurch worshipers who leave their church to go down the street to find a church more to their liking.

If we are reading Paul correctly, “do[ing] all things without grumbling or questioning” is a watershed state of the soul. Those who persist in such murmuring are not obedient to Christ and his gospel and are rejecting the divine call to “work out your own salvation.” They impede their own souls and the souls of their brothers and sisters in this matter. They are undertows to the body of Christ. So if you are one of these people, understand that when you finally stand before your Savior, you will answer with shame.

Paul sees the New Testament church as the people of the new exodus who have been delivered from a spiritual Egypt by the blood of Christ, the Passover Lamb, and who are now on their way home to the ultimate promised land. And he wants us to get it right.⁶

Be examples. If they get it right (by putting away their “grumbling” and “questioning”), they will become examples to the pagan culture of Philippi, and even to the world. Paul’s full thought is, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (vv. 14-16a). The self-conscious, “wannabe” Roman culture of Philippi that gave devotion to Caesar as “Lord” was “crooked and twisted” indeed. The church’s declaration that Jesus is Messiah and Yahweh was blasphemous to the imperial cult. Such twisted perversity! Yet amidst this perversity (if the Philippians repented of their grouching and murmuring), the church would be blameless and innocent toward God, and their kind conduct with one another as brothers and sisters would demonstrate that they were children of God to that “twisted” culture.

The sentence continues, “among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (vv. 15b, 16a). This is an allusion to Daniel 12:3, which describes the resurrection age when “those who are wise shall

shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Thus Christians who live in humble harmony as they should, considering others more important than themselves, shine resurrection light in a dark world, especially as they are “holding fast to the word of life,” the gospel of Christ.⁷

We are prone to think that the way we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ is a matter of indifference and that we are entitled to a little grouchiness, *goggusmon*. Even more, we can convince ourselves that a critical spirit is a virtue. We have probably all met someone who claimed to have the gift of criticism. “After all, someone needs to have the courage to say what *I know* everyone is thinking. Besides, a little disdain for others will be good for them. We wouldn’t want them to think too highly of themselves, would we? Some ‘healthy’ grumbling and questioning will help this ship sail right.” But that is not what Paul says. In fact, such conduct impedes the working out of salvation in the church. In fact, it can ruin one’s own soul or the soul of another in the church. It can make the church the cultural joke of “a crooked and twisted generation.”

Our conduct in the church must be a matter of *phobos* and *tromos* — “fear and trembling.” Jesus, who was obedient unto death (v. 8), bids us through Paul, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (vv. 12, 13).

Be positive and joyous. Paul’s next comment, which finishes his sentence, is surprising because it seems out of sync as he injects a personal note: “so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (v. 16b). Gordon Fee remarks, “Most likely the sentence has gotten away from him a bit, and this final phrase is to be understood primarily in response to their ‘shining as lights in the world as they hold firm the word of life.’”⁸ However that may be, Paul tied the effectiveness of his apostolic ministry (as to whether it was “in vain”) to the way those in the church in Philippi lived out their calling with one another. And this reference to “the day of Christ” moved him to thoughts of joy.

Paul’s joy. The apostle twice sounds the note of joy in verse 17: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.” The sacrificial image Paul evokes was common practice in both pagan and Jewish sacrifices. A priest would offer a sacrifice and then later pour out a sacrificial libation to complement it. So Paul saw the Philippians as priests offering a sacrificial offering of faith, followed by his pouring his own libation over it. Was Paul referring to his death? We do not know. But what is clear is that he viewed his service as a complement or contribution to their service. Paul’s Christlike humility flashed bright here because he viewed himself as a complement to

their sacrifice and not vice versa.⁹ At this thought his joy peaked. Literally he said, “I rejoice and co-rejoice with you all.”

The Philippians’ joy. Paul invites them to join his double-dose of joy with a double-dip of their own: “Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me” (v. 18).

The joy note sounds four times in the space of these two verses, and that is very significant. Up to now all mentions of joy (except 1:25) have referenced Paul’s joy (cf. 1:4, 18 [twice]; 2:2, 17 [twice]).

But now with this imperative to rejoice, a shift takes place, and their joy will be commanded three times more (cf. 3:1; 4:4). Also, this first imperative was totally meshed with Paul’s joy and was a command to rejoice in the midst of suffering.¹⁰ What we have here is a partaking of the fellowship of the gospel at its deepest level (cf. 1:5, 7) — a fellowship rooted in the three-way bond of Paul, Christ, and the Philippians.

In fact, the driving theological reality is Christ himself, whose self-humiliation (vv. 6-8) and super-exaltation (vv. 9-11) are the ground of assurance of future victory and the motivating example to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (vv. 12, 13).

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. (2:19-24)

12

Timothy: One Who Seeks Others' Interests

PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24

Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, a novel about the mid-nineteenth-century Church of England, ends with a concluding word about the Reverend Mr. Harding, the humble pastor of the tiny church of St. Cuthbert. Trollope writes:

The Author now leaves him in the hands of his readers; not as a hero, not as a man to be admired and talked of, not as a man who should be toasted at public dinners and spoken of with conventional absurdity as a perfect divine, but as a good man without guile, believing humbly in the religion which he has striven to teach, and guided by the precepts which he has striven to learn.¹

This is a fitting tribute to the humble, selfless man of God that Trollope created in Mr. Harding, and in anticipation of the text before us, it makes a fitting tribute to Paul's humble disciple Timothy — with the exception that Timothy *is* “a man to be admired and talked of,” as we shall see.

The Apostle Paul's brief references to Timothy and then Epaphroditus here in Philippians are not casual but rather are meant to capture our attention and top off Paul's train of thought that began in 1:27 with the charge, “Only let your manner of life [as citizens of the kingdom] be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Paul's thought goes like this: In 1:27-30 he instructs the Philippians on how to live lives worthy of the gospel in relation to the surrounding pagan

world — namely, by “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27). In doing this Paul tells them not to be “frightened in anything” (v. 28) and that it has been granted them to “not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (v. 29). This is the face and disposition with which the Philippians are to live in this world.

Next, in 2:1-4, Paul tells the Philippians how to live lives worthy of the gospel within the fellowship of the church. Very specifically, they were to treat each other with selfless humility: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (vv. 3, 4).

Paul viewed all of this as so vital that in 2:5-11 he reached for the ultimate example of Christ, saying “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,” and used the most exalted language to describe Christ’s astonishing self-humiliation and super-exaltation (vv. 6-11).

Then, in verses 12-18, on the basis of Christ’s example Paul again refocused his call for the church to walk worthy of the gospel of Christ: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (vv. 12, 13). If the church does this, its people will shine as lights amidst a crooked and twisted generation as they hold fast to the gospel. This will be cause for multiple and mutual rejoicings!

Now in verses 19-30 Paul gives flesh-and-blood examples of the selfless conduct to which he is calling the Philippian church. Here are men who live lives “worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Travel plans. Paul begins with Timothy: “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you” (v. 19). Remember, Paul is under arrest in Rome. And as always with Paul, there is no presumption in his planning as he hopes “in the Lord Jesus” to send Timothy their way. This is not a glib cliché. This is the way Paul lived, as other outtakes from his letters make clear: “if the Lord wills” (1 Corinthians 4:19) and “if the Lord permits” (16:7) — *Deo volenti*.

Paul bows to God’s will, but at the same time he longs for Timothy to make that round-trip to Philippi and back to Rome because he felt sure that cheerful, heartening news would be coming from Philippi as the Philippians read his letter and took it to heart. Paul deeply loved this little church, as he said in the introduction of this letter: “I hold you in my heart . . . how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (cf. 1:7, 9). As a result Paul had hitched his emotions to the ups and downs of the church. Certainly the apostle was a happy man, but his was not an unclouded happiness. The ministry brought new joys, but with those joys there were also new sorrows. As he had earlier written to the Corinthians, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" (2 Corinthians 11:28, 29). Similarly, he wrote to the Thessalonians, "When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain" (1 Thessalonians 3:5). Paul's heart rose and fell with his people. His greatest pains were heart pains over his people. But his greatest joys were heart palpitations over their advances. Paul anticipated that news from the Philippians would do his heart good.

Oh, that we would have such vulnerable hearts, that our emotions would be tied to the health of the church and the advance of the gospel. Modern culture isn't disposed this way. The cultural ideal is to make a place for yourself away from the ups and downs of life — a kind of Buddhist retreat. Our modern method is to do this through wealth, environment, and technology — plastic insulations. But that is not what God calls us to. The Christian life is meant to be a life of passion and commitment and vulnerability. The detached, benign smile is not divine; it is the face of false religion. The face of Christ is his visage on the cross and his radiant resurrection countenance. His smile is that of *shalom* amidst the storms of life. Tears and laughter are the divine meter.

TIMOTHY'S CARING HEART (vv. 20, 21)

At the moment of Paul's writing, the condition of the Roman church was bleak — even shocking — because young Timothy stood alone in Rome in his commitments.

Self-centered Romans. The Roman church was afflicted with a pathetic self-centeredness, as is so clear from Paul's sad report: "For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (vv. 20, 21). Literally Paul said, "I have no one equal in soul." As he spiritually surveyed the Christian community in Rome, Paul could not find anyone whom he deemed of like soul or mind.²

This seems an astonishing statement, but the rest of what Paul said will make it clear. Paul's assessment was that there was no one like Timothy "who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare" — that is, one who, when he arrived on the scene in Philippi, would give the active interest and practical care that Paul desired be shown³ — the kind of care he himself would give. But Timothy would prove to be the genuine article.

Ironically, the very self-centeredness that Paul had just warned the Philippians about in 2:4 ("Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others") was part of everyday life in Rome — "They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (v. 21). Paul has already told us that even while he was under arrest in Rome, "Some

indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry” (1:15; cf. v. 17). Thus many of the capable preachers in Rome were infused with a mean-spirited, selfish ambition. Certainly there were good Christians in Rome because once the others heard of Paul’s plight, “most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (1:14).

Who was Paul referring to? Certainly not Epaphroditus, who had almost died in serving the gospel and was going to carry the letter back to Philippi. And certainly not the women in the Roman church because they were not candidates to make the dangerous trip to encourage the Philippians. And for similar reasons, Paul’s indictment did not apply to elderly men or the infirm.

Those whom Paul indicted were the able-bodied men in the church who had no concern about the church in Philippi or about the interests of Christ in the spread of the gospel. In a word, the able-bodied Christian men of Rome were infused with self and selfishness. Evidently the real men like Luke and Aristarchus were out of town, leaving only young Timothy to be the man. But how he shined!

Selfless Timothy. Paul knew that Timothy’s concern for the welfare of the Philippians would be so genuine that when Timothy arrived in Philippi, his concern would look very much like “worry” because that is how the word “concerned” (v. 20) is often translated. Put positively, he would be wonderfully anxious about the Philippians’ welfare.⁴ Such godly transparent interest in the welfare of others is a thing of beauty. It is said that when Henrietta Mears, one of the most effective American Christians of the twentieth century, would walk into a room, each person often had the feeling that she was saying to him or her, “Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”⁵ Miss Mears’s genuine concern for others marked and elevated a whole generation of remarkable leaders.

Timothy had learned the art of putting others before himself. In a bygone day when a prominent soldier was returning from foreign duty, a newly hired driver was sent to the station to pick him up. When he asked how he would recognize the soldier, the soldier’s aged mother said, “Look for somebody helping someone else.” And sure enough, when the train pulled in, the driver saw a man assisting an old woman, and it was the soldier!⁶ So it was with Timothy.

Timothy was the only one left with Paul in Rome who was free enough from his own self-interests to devote himself to the welfare of others. May we, like Timothy, rise above the tow of our culture, even our “Christian culture.” Lesslie Newbigin, theologian and missiologist, writes: “I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that. . . . I also saw that quite a lot of evan-

gelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God.”⁷ What a strange irony — that the gospel could become the occasion for a profound self-absorption. We do live in an age of unprecedented self, of weightless souls consumed with their own gravity. And today many Christians actually believe that it is “Christian” to pursue self-fulfillment as an ultimate goal in life. I have witnessed this several times when I have sat listening to a preacher offer up the common bromide, “We cannot love others until we love ourselves” and have seen the congregation nod and murmur assent while I am inwardly saying, “Not!” What unbiblical foolishness!

But Timothy’s example trumps such self-delusion. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest passed by the man who had fallen among thieves, perhaps — reading the Bible. When we do that, we pass by the visible sign of the Cross raised [in] our path to show us that, not our way, but God’s way must be done. It is a strange fact that Christians frequently consider their work so important and urgent that they will allow nothing to disturb them. They think they are doing God a service in this, but actually they are disdaining God’s “Crooked yet straight path.” They do not want a life that is crossed and balked. But it is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God.⁸

TIMOTHY’S EXCELLENCE OF CHARACTER (v. 22)

Along with Timothy’s caring heart, the second and parallel reason for Paul’s dispatching Timothy to Philippi was his excellence of character.

His worth. The Philippians were well aware of Timothy’s character. Paul reminds them, “But you know Timothy’s proven worth” (v. 22a). Timothy was there when Lydia, a seller of purple, became the first convert on the soil of Europe. He had witnessed the baptism of her and her entire household. Perhaps he assisted in the ceremony in the Gangetes (cf. Acts 16:11-15). Timothy had served as Paul’s envoy to Macedonia a decade earlier (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Acts 17:14; 18:5; 19:22), to Corinth on several occasions (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10), and also to Ephesus (cf. 1 Timothy 1:2ff.).⁹ Timothy had proven his mettle.

His devotion. Furthermore, his devotion to the Apostle Paul was remarkable: “as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (v. 22b).

Paul was Timothy's spiritual father because Timothy, like so many others, had come to Christ under Paul's ministry.

But that was not Paul's point here. Rather, it was their father-son friendship. Stephen Ambrose, in his best-selling book *Comrades*, describes friendship:

Friends never cheat each other, or take advantage, or lie. Friends do not spy on one another, yet they have no secrets. Friends glory in each other's successes and are downcast by the failures. Friends minister to each other, nurse each other. Friends give to each other, worry about each other, stand always ready to help. Perfect friendship is rarely achieved, but at its height it is an ecstasy.¹⁰

It certainly was that for Paul and Timothy. Their friendship had grown over the years on the ancient apprenticeship model. Timothy had learned by observing, listening to instruction, and doing. They had endured tumultuous times together, and young Timothy was ever the learner. The depth of their friendship is seen in the Pastoral Epistles where Paul twice called Timothy "my child" (cf. 1 Timothy 1:18; 2 Timothy 2:1). Now Paul trusted Timothy to act just as he would.

But most of all, in Timothy's serving with Paul in the gospel, Timothy followed the servant role of Jesus who "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). Timothy had followed the model of Christ. Paul wanted the Philippians to observe, when Timothy came, a selfless flesh-and-blood example of one who lives a life "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). Timid by nature, Timothy had stood firm in one spirit with Paul and the Philippians, fearlessly striving side by side for the gospel (1:27). He had set aside rivalry and conceit and counted others more significant than himself, while looking out for the interests of others. He had put on the mind of Christ. He had put on the towel of Christ. He had devoted his life to the church as the place to work out his and his fellow believers' salvation with fear and trembling. He had long put away grumbling and questioning. And he shined as a light in the dark world. Timothy effervesced with apostolic joy.

The apostle placed all his confidence in Timothy's caring *heart* and excellence of *character*. Timothy's life said to the Philippians and to us that we too, by God's grace, can live lives that are worthy of the gospel as citizens of the kingdom.

The sacred author now left Timothy in the hands of his readers as a hero, as a man to be admired and talked of, a good man without guile, believing humbly in the faith he had labored to teach, and guided by the precepts he sought to learn from his apostle-father.

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. (2:25-30)

13

A Man to Honor

PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30

As we have seen, fellowship in the Philippian church was not of the ice cream social variety but was rather the fellowship of people bound together by a great spiritual quest. The Greek root word for *fellowship* occurs six times across the brief chapters of Philippians, rendered variously as “partnership” (twice), “partakers” (once), “participation” (once), and “share” (twice). And each occurrence emphasizes a different aspect of the Philippians’ fellowship or participation with one another: 1:5 emphasizes “partnership in the gospel”; 1:7 describes the Philippians as “partakers . . . of grace”; 2:1 lists their “participation in the Spirit”; 3:10 records Paul’s desire to “share” in Christ’s sufferings; and 4:14, 15 employ the words “share” and “partnership” to stress fellowship in giving — “Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only” (4:14, 15). So fellowship involved participation in the gospel and grace and the Spirit and suffering and giving. In 2:25-30 we learn that the Philippians had decided to express and confirm their fellowship with Paul by taking up an offering for him and dispatching an envoy to make the 800-mile trek to Rome and pay Paul’s prison expenses and minister to his needs. This was crucial because the Roman prison system didn’t provide for food, clothing, or medical care.

So young, strong, healthy, godly Epaphroditus was chosen and was entrusted with a considerable sum of money. This meant that he was not traveling alone when he fell ill because Paul had established apostolic precedent in sending large gifts by group (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:16-22). The most likely scenario, therefore, is that when Epaphroditus fell ill, one of his trav-

eling companions (or an acquaintance passing the other way) returned to Philippi with the alarming news, while another, or others, stayed with Epaphroditus and nursed him along so that he finally made it to Rome, very much worse for the wear.¹ But ever-faithful Epaphroditus delivered the goods and set himself, as he was able, to caring for Paul as the Philippians' surrogate.

However, it wasn't long until Paul decided that the young man should return to Philippi for reasons that the apostle would later explain. What is at once apparent from what Paul says here is that he was concerned that the Philippians give the young man a proper welcome. It was very possible that the little church, preoccupied with surviving in Philippi's obtrusive, oppressive, "little Rome" culture, coupled with their surprise at Epaphroditus' early return and the fact that he didn't remain with Paul as long as they expected, could have worked to make his "welcome" to be little more than a perfunctory acknowledgment of his return, without the church truly engaging him and hearing his story and expressing appreciation.

This is what happened to my generation after the Vietnam War when our men and women returned from an unpopular war that was fought a long ways from home. There were no outpourings of public appreciation and no parades because most people wanted to forget. America's corporate amnesia was a sad thing. And it took years for a proper monument to be erected for those who gave everything.²

A church (like a culture) that does not recognize the sacrifice of its own for the sake of the gospel makes a big mistake. And the wise apostle simply would not let that happen. Moreover, Epaphroditus' selfless conduct was a living example of the mind of Christ in his serving the interests of others. So in verses 25-28 Paul prepares the way for a proper homecoming upon Epaphroditus' return to Philippi.

PREPARING THE WAY HOME (vv. 25-28)

Paul began with an unusually complimentary introductory fanfare. There was no drum roll, but it was definitely "*Here's Epaphroditus!*": "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need" (v. 25).

His resumé. Epaphroditus' introductory resumé had five entries, three from Paul and two that referenced the Philippians. Paul called him "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier." In a world of imitations, "my brother" referred to the real thing — the theological reality that two who were truly brothers shared the same spiritual bloodline. "My brother" resounded with affection, the love of believer for believer — "my dear brother."

“Fellow worker” is intentionally elevating. Jesus would say of the church in Ephesus, “I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:3), and this was singularly true of Epaphroditus. He worked, but more, he was Paul’s “fellow worker,” the great apostle’s coworker. Paul was the public, up-front apostle, and Epaphroditus was the behind-the-scenes servant. Yet the two were equally coworkers — one in work and dignity.

Next, the image that “fellow soldier” evokes lifts Epaphroditus high. Paul says elsewhere, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). This was the battle. The two fought shoulder-to-shoulder in Rome. Perhaps Paul had in mind the trademark imperial soldiers’ battle ethic of standing side-by-side, dug in with shields locked solid, swords drawn. The truth is, young Epaphroditus was a battle-tested warrior who had been wounded in combat and was being sent home for a rest.³ This man was no weekend warrior. He had proven himself with distinction.

Beyond that, Epaphroditus had served the Philippians themselves in a twofold manner, as “your messenger and minister to my need” (v. 25b) — two titles of honor that rightfully belonged to the great Apostle Paul himself.⁴ “Messenger” is literally “apostle.” And though Paul did not use *apostle* here in the full technical sense of one who had seen the resurrection and had a special commission to preach the gospel (cf. Acts 1:21-23; Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 15:7), it was, nevertheless, a designation of intended dignity. Likewise, “minister” is also a title of dignity⁵ that was evocative of priestly service as Epaphroditus ministered to Paul’s needs.⁶

Here’s the picture: Epaphroditus was a *layman* whom we would never have heard of were it not for Paul’s brief reference here. Epaphroditus served in no public capacity. He did not shepherd a flock, as did Timothy. He did not take the gospel to an unreached area. He did not receive special revelation. And he wrote nothing.⁷ All he did was faithfully discharge his duty by delivering a bag of money to Paul and then by looking after him. Yet he is called by Paul “brother . . . fellow worker . . . fellow soldier” and was identified to the Philippians as “apostle” and “minister.” We must understand that to serve in some unnoticed, unrecognized place in the body of Christ is as much the work of Christ as is public ministry. Paul teaches the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12 in his exposition of giftedness. Paul believed this implicitly, and so must we!

Epaphroditus was remarkable. He held himself responsible to God by the same standard of faithfulness that Paul used for himself. No wonder Paul singled the young man out as an example to the church in Philippi, where so many were looking out for themselves rather than others.

Epaphroditus had put on the mind of Christ, taking on the humble life of an unsung servant. The Philippians needed to see the young man for the man he was and receive him as such.

His homesickness. As a further motivation to properly welcome Epaphroditus back, Paul mentions Epaphroditus' homesickness: "For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill" (v. 26). This was not a case of simple longing for a warm bed and some Aegean cuisine. It was a complex tension. Paul had used the same term in the introduction to this letter to describe his own personal longing for the Philippians "with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8). But what really distressed Epaphroditus was not the fact that he had been so ill, but the knowledge that news had gotten back to Philippi of how desperately sick he was. He was distressed because he feared they were distressed. This may be difficult to understand in this day of cell phones when while in England I can call a friend and have him answer on his cell as he walks out of a restaurant in France! However, longtime missionary families understand Epaphroditus well and can tell you of quite different days when it took weeks to communicate.

How intensely Epaphroditus mentally suffered is seen in that the only other use of the Greek word here translated "distressed" is used to describe Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane (cf. Mark 14:33).⁸ The young man agonized as he imagined the prayers that were being offered for him by his brothers and sisters in the church. Some of them, he knew, had lost sleep over his plight. How he longed for them to know he was okay. What a sympathetic, empathetic soul Epaphroditus was! Again, the young man was like Christ in his lack of self-interest and focus upon others. "You Philippians, receive him properly."

His illness. If that wasn't enough to convince them to give him a good welcome, Paul adds, "Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow" (v. 27). The gravity of Epaphroditus' trauma was such that it suggests that his fellow travelers had given up hope that he would live. Again the example of Christlike servanthood is repeated. Just as Christ had died as a servant, just as Paul had faced death serving the gospel, so Epaphroditus had come near to death in Christ's service.

We who have the benefits of modern medicine may easily read right past "but God had mercy on him." But in Paul's day few people drew back from death's door. This wasn't a matter of the young man's simply getting better but of God's direct healing⁹ — "the sovereign merciful act of God himself" (O'Brien).¹⁰ Epaphroditus had been spared death by the merciful intervention of God himself. And, as the apostle was quick to mention, the mercy extended further, to Paul himself — "and not only on him but on me also, lest

I should have sorrow upon sorrow” (v. 27b). Like Christ, Paul was “a man of sorrows” due to his calling (cf. Isaiah 53:3). He was also a man who, amidst sorrows, experienced a fountain of joy, as we note from the sixteen instances of forms of the word *joy* in Philippians. Among his present sorrows in Rome was the selfish rivalry of some Christian leaders. How thankful he was that the sorrow of Epaphroditus’ death was not overlaid upon this sorrow. How grateful he was for the sovereign will of God and for divine mercy. But what Paul wanted the Philippians to know was that when they received Epaphroditus back again, they were receiving a man who, as it were, was back from the dead. So this was likewise a mercy to them.

For all these reasons — Paul’s esteem for Epaphroditus as a brother, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, an apostle, and a messenger who desperately longed for home and was distressed at their distress and who almost died carrying out their assignment — because of all of this Paul says, “I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious” (v. 28). When Epaphroditus arrived, the Philippians would be relieved to know he was safe, Epaphroditus would be relieved to be home, and Paul would be “less anxious” about him. Nothing would please Paul more than a proper reunion.

PAUL COMMANDS A WARM WELCOME (vv. 29, 30)

Paul now urged, “So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me” (vv. 29, 30). During the long separation between Paul and the Philippian church (and especially since his imprisonment in Rome), the Philippians had been unable to fully express their fellowship/partnership in Paul’s ministry — especially since they lacked a way to supply his needs. But Epaphroditus’ heroics enabled them to complete their gospel obligation to Paul. They owed the young man big-time.

In effect, single-talented as Epaphroditus was, he was like Christ. Paul makes this very clear in the Greek because the phrase that tells us that Epaphroditus “nearly died” in verse 30 is exactly the same as the phrase in 2:8, which describes Christ coming “to the point of death.” Epaphroditus’ near death for Paul echoes Christ’s real death for us. This young man had the mind of Christ.

Epaphroditus represents a category of people who are to be honored.¹¹ If we have read Paul correctly, it is not only the up-front people, those with the more public gifts, who are to be honored but also those who regardless of their gifts live out the example of Christ. By holding up Epaphroditus, Paul contradicted the Greco-Roman culture’s, and also our modern culture’s, rewarding those who seek prestige and position.¹² This ought to lay the ax

to those of us who define success in the evangelical community as a kind of lordship: sitting in the honored seat, being the fêted guest at luncheons, speaking to vast throngs, building monuments, naming buildings after ourselves, collecting honorary titles.

Over the course of chapter 2, Paul had taken great pains to get the Philippians outside themselves, beginning with the command in verses 3, 4: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Paul had held up the supreme example of Christ in verses 5-11. He had raised the example of his protégé Timothy in verses 19-24, as a man who looked out for others’ interests. He had lifted up the layman Epaphroditus as an unforgettable example in verses 25-30.

But what about Paul himself? As we would expect, we see that the great apostle practiced what he preached as he put the interests of others above his own in sending Timothy and Epaphroditus back to Philippi, leaving himself alone and unattended in Rome. Was Paul thinking about himself during those dark days in Rome? Hardly! He was willing to sacrifice his own interests for the well-being of others. Paul, the theologian, lived out every aspect of his theology in the most practical ways.

What about us? We know that public ministry gifts must be used to glorify Christ in looking out for the interests of others. We know that God sees all and will hold his leaders responsible. But what about the quiet, perhaps single-talented Christians like Epaphroditus? Will they get a pass? No! Rather, they should fear that if they bury their talent (thinking “it won’t matter”), God will certainly see and hold them accountable. They should read what the master said to the lazy servant in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14-29.

Epaphroditus certainly wasn’t Paul or Timothy. He was a “brother,” a “fellow worker,” a “fellow soldier,” a “messenger [apostle],” a “messenger” — *that’s all!* He had the mind of Christ — *that’s all!* He is honored today by both man and God — *that’s all!*

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh — (3:1-3)

14

Rejoicing and Warning

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-3

As most English versions have rendered it, Paul begins chapter 3 with, “Finally, my brothers” — a phrase that has occasioned a lot of humor at the expense of preachers, as, for example when the little boy whispered to his father, “What does the preacher mean when he says ‘finally’?” To which his father muttered, “Absolutely nothing, son.”¹ Of course, we preachers could argue that we have apostolic precedent for this because right here, as the Apostle Paul concludes, he says “Finally” and then goes on for two more chapters!

Actually, however, most of our translations have made this more difficult than it is because there is evidence in post-classical Greek that the word functions as a transitional particle to introduce a fresh point in the progress of thought and could well be translated, “Well then, my brothers, rejoice” or “And so, my brothers, rejoice” or “Moreover, my brothers, rejoice.”² This fits well with the fact that the occurrences of “rejoice” in the book of Philippians function like a hinge at the beginning or the end of the sections in which it appears. Paul uses “rejoice” first in 1:18 when he concludes, “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.” Here in 3:1 he builds on the second occurrence of “rejoice” from 2:17, 18 where he had affirmed, “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.” In the intervening verses Paul expresses his joy over the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus, especially the latter who almost died for the gospel (cf. vv. 19-30, esp. vv. 28, 29).

So as Paul begins a new section that outlines the doctrinal troubles the Philippians might soon face, he writes, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the

Lord.” And when he transitions to the following section in 4:4 he will hinge it with the command, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Significantly, as Paul prefaces the warnings of chapter 3 with the call to rejoice, he couples it for the first time in Philippians with the qualifier “in the Lord” because the Lord himself is both the *occasion* and *source* of their joy. Such joy (because it is “in the Lord”) is independent of adverse circumstances. The great John Wesley exuded his joy in the Lord on a three-week preaching mission with Rev. John Nelson during which the two slept on the hard floor with no padding. Wesley used Nelson’s coat for a pillow, and Nelson used Burkitt’s notes on the New Testament for his. As Nelson relates it, “One morning about three o’clock Mr. Wesley turned over, and, finding me awake, clapped me on the side saying: ‘Brother Nelson, let us be of good cheer: I have one whole side yet, for the skin is off but one side!’”³ Over the years I have seen this rejoicing in believers who manifested joy in the Lord during tragedy and physical pain. I can think of one man in particular who, though terminally ill, actually brought cheer to those who attended him in the hospital.

The whole of verse 1 reads, “Finally [And so], my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.” What are “the same things” of which he writes? They are Paul’s frequent exhortations to rejoice during affliction, as we have already noted (cf. 2:28, 29; 3:1; 4:4). Paul doesn’t mind repeating these exhortations — it’s “no trouble.”

Further, his call for rejoicing in the Lord is “safe” for them because it serves as a safeguard against the lures of those who would attempt to undermine their faith. The point is “Paul understands joy in the Lord to be *inherently* ‘safe’ (*asphales*), by definition a bulwark against all manner of dangers” (Bockmuehl).⁴ The often-quoted saying from Nehemiah 8:10 states this truth explicitly and memorably: “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” Joy in or from the Lord is inherently strengthening. This is implicit in Psalm 81:1: “Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!” The books of Chronicles tell us that after King David had installed the ark in Jerusalem, his song of thanks linked strength and joy: “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place” (1 Chronicles 16:27).

There is safety for all believers in the joy of the Lord. Matthew Henry, the Puritan expositor, wrote, “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.”⁵ The joy of the Lord is a divine armament. Those living in his joy are resistant to attacks that take others down. Resiliency marks their steps. The taste of joy renders the tempter’s offerings bland by comparison.

So we see why the apostle is happy to continually urge his followers to rejoice in the Lord — because rejoicing will serve as a safeguard through all of life. Are you safe, or are you in danger?

THREEFOLD WARNING AGAINST THE CIRCUMCISION PARTY (v. 2)

We don't know what triggered Paul's explosive warning, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (v. 2). We do know that Paul had been fighting off the Judaizers for years. Judaizers were Jewish Christians (or ostensibly Christians) who insisted that Gentile Christians must submit to the Mosaic law, including circumcision.⁶ In Acts 15 we first read of Paul and Barnabas withstanding them, and the resultant Council of Jerusalem backed Paul and Barnabas. Later when the Judaizers invaded the new church in Galatia, Paul pulled out his verbal flamethrower: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8, 9; cf. 3:1-14). Paul had no use for the circumcision party.

Perhaps as Paul was dictating his letter to the Philippians from his Roman confinement, he had become newly aware of some Judaizing activity in the Roman church. Whatever the exact incident, Paul here engages in searing rhetoric with three alliterated insults that all begin with the letter *kappa* (*k*): "Look out for the dogs" (*kunas*), "look out for the evil doers" (*kakous ergatas*), "look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (*katatomē*). These fierce alliterated epithets would have had resounding effects on the ears of the listeners. But far more striking than their acoustical effects was that they were freighted with ironic sarcasm, as each of the three insults took a virtue that the Judaizers claimed for themselves and reversed it. Paul impaled the Judaizers on their own vocabulary.

Those dogs! Frankly, Paul's first warning, "Look out for the dogs," would hurt my dog's feelings if this could be translated into Canine because my dog has never done anything wrong. Daisy doesn't bark, she doesn't beg, she doesn't steal. All she does is flash a panting smile as she tries to figure out what I want her to do. Daisy is, well — perfect!

But first-century Israelites didn't have pets, and they had no use for dog food. Dogs were coyote-like scavengers who fed on roadkill, carrion, filth, and garbage — they were vivid images of the unclean. So for the Jews, a dog was a perfect metaphor for those who did not keep Israel's dietary laws, and thus a powerful metaphor for Gentiles and lapsed Jews. But here in Philippians, by warning Christians, "Look out for the dogs" Paul effected a stunning reversal, charging that the Judaizers were the unclean "dogs" who

stood outside the covenant blessings.⁷ As Karl Barth put it, “Like the lash of a whip comes Paul’s term: dogs! — unclean.”⁸ Ouch!

Those evildoers! The second epithet, “look out for the evildoers,” is likewise a barbed irony because it is a pun on the Judaizers’ claim to be doing the works of the Law. “The works of the Law” was a pious slogan used to distinguish Jew from Gentile, or the observant Jew from the non-observant.⁹ Thus by Paul’s calling the Judaizers “evildoers,” Paul was saying that rather than doing the works of the Law, they were literally “evil workers” (*kakous ergatas*). The irony for the Judaizers was that all their attention to the works of the Law made them evil workers — and therefore spiritual Gentiles — dogs.

Those mutilators! The third epithet, “look out for those who mutilate the flesh,” is particularly scathing because the word “mutilate” (*katatomē*) is a sarcastic play on the word for “circumcision” (*peritomē*).¹⁰ Moreover, the same word for “mutilation” is used in 1 Kings 18 (LXX) to describe the self-mutilation of the prophets of Baal (cf. 1 Kings 18:28). Thus, as Peter T. O’Brien concludes, “Circumcision, their greatest source of pride, is interpreted by the apostle as mutilation — a sure sign that they have no part in God’s people at all.”¹¹

So as we take a step back, what we see in Paul’s three sharp warnings is that he took the Judaizers’ rhetoric and slapped them hard with their own slogans. And he alliterated it so it would stick firm in the minds of the Philippians. What a warning to us if we should venture to add legalistic requirements to the gospel of grace.

A THREEFOLD DESCRIPTION OF THE TRUE CIRCUMCISION (v. 3)

The Old Testament prophets had long lamented the uncircumcised hearts of their people and called for spiritual circumcision (cf. Jeremiah 9:25). Indeed, as Paul argued in Romans 4:9-12 Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised. Paul understood that those who have faith are the circumcised in heart. So Paul included himself emphatically in his declaration, “For we are the [real] circumcision” (Philippians 3:3). Thus Paul carried on his attack on the Judaizers with the “unequivocal assertion of the great spiritual reversal: Judaizers are the new Gentiles, while Christian believers have become true Jews” (Silva).¹² Paul was explicit: “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Romans 2:28, 29). True circumcision is that of the heart and is a matter of faith and grace from beginning to end.

Here Paul selects three qualities of the true people of God.

Upward service. The real circumcision is “worship by the Spirit of God.” Those who are in Christ are part of a new order. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The newness of the new creation is the product of creation power (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4-6). But the passing of the *old* and the coming of the *new* is also meant to call to mind the coming of the new covenant that Paul earlier described wherein we have been made “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6). The evidence of the new covenant and circumcision of the heart is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 8:8, 9).

This indwelling is a wonder, as John Donne so well said:

*Wilt thou love God as he thee? then digest,
My soul, this wholesome meditation,
How God the Spirit, by angels waited on
In heaven, doth make his temple in thy breast.*

JOHN DONNE, *HOLY SONNETS*, XV, LINES 1-4

And when God indwells us, he makes us worshipers. His Spirit takes our part before his own throne and helps us with our weaknesses, empowering acceptable worship and prayer (cf. Romans 8:26, 27). Worshiping by the Spirit of God frees us from bondage to any one place. All of life becomes worship.

Outward boasting. Secondly, those who are the real circumcision “glory in Christ Jesus.” This is because it is the work of the Holy Spirit to exalt Jesus (cf. John 16:14). When we worship by the Spirit, we naturally glory in Christ Jesus. More exactly, “we *boast* in Christ Jesus.” We boast because it is not our hold on Christ that saves us — it is Christ. We boast because it is not our joy in Christ that saves us — it is Christ. We boast because it is not even our faith that saves us — it is Christ. Christ becomes the Divine Obsession¹³ of the real circumcision. Christ becomes the singular concern and focus of his people. The evidence of the fullness of the Spirit is a one-track mind and a one-theme tongue that speaks perpetually of Christ. Christ becomes the source of all satisfaction.

*Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find.*

CHARLES WESLEY, “JESUS, LOVER OF MY SOUL,” 1740

Christ becomes the focus of our ongoing praise. We boast ever more in the cross. Christ is the center of all Heaven and the Obsession of every son or daughter who worships him by the Spirit of God.

Inward confidence. The spiritual corollary to boasting in Christ is the third characteristic of circumcised hearts: they “put no confidence in the flesh” — that is, they put no confidence in anything that is outside of Christ.¹⁴ If your boast is in Christ, your confidence cannot be in yourself. And most certainly, as the mention of “flesh” is at least a passing glance at circumcision, we must never place our confidence in external religious observance, no matter what it may be.

We must be aware of false circumcision in whatever form it may come to us — in newly packaged legalisms, in glittering “give and get” promises of the prosperity gospel, or in the self-help formulas that flood the media. But beyond vigilance there is the safety of joy in the Lord — to be so full of joy that no other offers appeal to us, to have tasted what is good so deeply that we have no taste for the allurements of the tempter, for the joy of the Lord is our strength. And, lastly, joy is the currency of those who are the real circumcision, “who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

. . . though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith — (3:4-9)

15

From Reveling to Revulsion

PHILIPPIANS 3:4-9

Midway through Paul's composing this letter to his beloved church, something reminded the apostle that religious wolf packs were at that moment traveling the trade routes from Jerusalem toward Philippi and that they potentially could savage his tiny flock with their promise of a deeper and more complete faith through the adoption of circumcision and observance of the Law. Thus we saw Paul's fiery warning and declaration, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. **For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh**" (vv. 2, 3). This apparently further inspired and energized Paul to take on the Judaizers at their own fleshly game because he switched to the first person and added, "though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also" (v. 4).

What follows is the apostle's unparalleled description of his human achievements before he met Christ, which has been called "one of the most remarkable personal confessions that the ancient world has bequeathed to us." As we know, this description of his fleshly accomplishments was really a masterful setup because Paul's boasting in his achievements paved the way for his remarkable rejection of them.

PAUL'S DEPENDENCE UPON HIS SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS (vv. 4-6)

We begin in verse 4 with Paul's self-perception when he was still Saul of Tarsus: "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have

more.” For starters, Paul declared without any qualifications that his ground for personal boasting exceeded that of any person in Judaism! In effect, he threw down the gauntlet, saying, “Top this if you can, you Judaizers.” And then Paul deftly chronicled seven personal superiorities of which he could boast.

The first four are inherited privileges, followed by a trio of personal accomplishments.

Paul's inherited privileges. First, Paul was “circumcised on the eighth day” (v. 5), or literally “with respect to circumcision an eight day one.” He was circumcised by his parents seven days after his birth (the Jewish eighth day) in strict compliance with the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3). Most significantly, this meant that he was not a proselyte from paganism. He was no later-in-life convert. He was an eight-dayer — an insider from birth.

Second, Paul was “of the people of Israel” (v. 5), or more exactly “of the *race* of Israel.” This meant that in addition to not being a proselyte he couldn’t possibly be a child of proselytes. Racially he was a pure-blooded Israelite. *Israel* and *Israelite* were inside terms by which Jews referred to their own nation. Others might call them “Jews,” but only they called themselves “the children of Israel.”² Paul was a total insider.

Third, he was “of the tribe of Benjamin” (v. 5). Benjamin was the only son born in the Promised Land (cf. Genesis 35:16-18). And the tribe of Benjamin was the only tribe to remain faithful to Judah and the house of David after the death of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 12:21). The tribe of Benjamin went into exile with the tribe of Judah and returned from exile with Judah to resettle Jerusalem (cf. Nehemiah 11:7-9, 31-36). Benjamin remained at the core of spirituality. King Saul, Israel’s first king, was a Benjaminite (cf. 1 Samuel 9:1, 2). And the Apostle Paul’s given name was Saul (cf. Acts 7:58; 13:9). Thus Paul’s heritage radiated insider pride.

Fourth, the Apostle Paul was “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (v. 5). Though Paul had been born outside the Holy Land in Tarsus, he was a “Hebrew,” and his parents were “Hebrews” before him. “Hebrew of Hebrews” also indicates that he spoke Hebrew and Aramaic (cf. Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). Paul spoke Hebrew or Aramaic when so many Diaspora Jews knew only Greek, and he prayed and read the Scriptures in Hebrew (cf. Acts 6:1, 2). Though Paul was born in Cilicia, his parents made sure that he had the best education in Jerusalem under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel (cf. Acts 26:4, 5; Galatians 1:14). Paul was a private school insider.

So we see that the apostle had impeccable credentials before he ever lifted a hand! In effect, regarding prestige his upbringing was not unlike that of our New England blue bloods whose genealogies and education and position have been established facts for generations. But Paul didn’t rest on his

ancestry or name, as do so many of the privileged. His track record was phenomenal, as we see in his trio of achievements (superiorities #5, 6, and 7).

Paul's personal achievements. Fifth, we read, "as to the law, a Pharisee" (v. 5). Pharisaism was a lay movement that had its beginnings when the Jews returned from exile. The movement solidified during the Maccabean times, and by the first century the Pharisees were the most impressive and respected group in Israel. According to Josephus they numbered about 6,000³ — an elite denomination within Israel. *Pharisee* means "separated one." The Pharisees distanced themselves from unclean persons and ate only with observant Jews.

Paul's ancestors were Pharisees, as he told the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 23:6). However, Paul's Pharisaism was a matter of choice and deep conviction as he voluntarily bound himself to keep the hundreds of commandments of the oral law.⁴ Paul was a brilliant, intransigent Pharisee, a heavyweight who could hold his own with anyone.

Sixth, we read "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (v. 6). Paul orchestrated a terror campaign against the church and had achieved a growing infamy as a Pharisaic terrorist. Luke chronicles this in Acts and, most notably, Paul's presence at the gruesome stoning of Stephen as he guarded the garments of the executioners while he gazed approvingly upon the execution (cf. Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1, 2). Most significantly, Jesus' opening words to Paul on the Damascus Road mentioned Paul's persecutions (cf. Acts 9:4, 5; 22:7, 8; 26:14, 15).⁵ Paul's self-appointed zeal initiated and led the way in the pogrom against Jewish Christians. He saw himself as a latter-day Phinehas in his zeal for the Law (cf. Numbers 25:6-8) and was highly esteemed by his people for his actions.

Seventh, and lastly, "as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (v. 6). Notice that Paul did not say he was sinless or perfect but "blameless." The Pharisees assumed that a faithful Israelite could keep the Torah's 613 commandments because the Law provided rituals and procedures to receive forgiveness and purification.⁶ Paul's conduct was "blameless" in the sense that "blameless" describes an exemplary way of life lived in accordance with Pharisaic interpretations. And this is how his peers saw him — wholly blameless. Peter T. O'Brien asserts that Paul "speaks of his blamelessness as an objective fact, as incontestable as his circumcision, his membership in the tribe of Benjamin, and his persecution of the church."⁷ Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was "blameless" under the Law.

What an amazing accomplishment and claim. Paul was a spiritual athlete in a category by himself. What focus the man must have had — what confidence — what self-possession — what discipline — what an iron will!

No living soul could gainsay Paul's fourfold insider credentials. No one could excel his threefold performance. His sevenfold superiority put him

in a class of his own. Paul's claim, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more" was no empty boast. Listen well, Judaizers, those of you who would import the laws and strictures of the old covenant back into Christ and his church. Listen to what this spiritual super-man has to say.

PAUL'S RADICAL REVERSAL (vv. 7-9)

Paul's accounting reversal. Paul astonished his readers (and us) by saying, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (v. 7). Paul is consciously precise here as he employs accounting terminology — "gain . . . loss." When the Victorian poet and pastor-theologian John Keble was a young don at Oxford, he served as his college's bursar (financial officer) for a brief period. Few pastors then, or now, are trained in balancing figures. During one embarrassing year Keble's balance was off by two thousand pounds, and nothing he did could resolve it — until someone solved the mystery by noting that Keble had written the year (around 1820) at the top of the column and then added it into the amount.⁸

As a checkbook-challenged pastor, I sympathize. But though Paul was not mathematically challenged (and uses careful accounting terms), his account balances in a very odd way. Everything was on the credit side and nothing on the debit side. However, in a flash he struck off everything in the credit column and inserted it in the debit column. Christ alone stands in the credit column. The apostle's language is explicit because "gain" is in the plural and "loss" is in the singular. One by one the apostle had carefully added up the individual items of merit as he looked to the judgment. They were real pluses. But in a blinding moment they became one great singular loss.⁹ Jesus Christ became Paul's one and only credit!

Paul went on to emphatically explain why this was so: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (v. 8a). This statement is uniquely personal and looks back to Paul's meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. There the grace of the Lord Jesus found Paul the terrorist. And from that point Paul began a process of understanding, first in the house of Ananias and then in Tarsus and then during several years in Arabia (cf. Galatians 1:17, 18).

Now Paul's understanding has become stunning because it is only here in Paul's writings that we find the intensely personal "Christ Jesus my Lord." This is the only place Paul called God the Father or Christ "*my Lord*." The wonder of this increases when we realize that the Philippian hymn of 2:6-11 climaxes with Jesus being given God's name "Lord" (Yahweh), so that at the end "every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ [Messiah] is Lord [Yahweh], to the glory of God the Father" (2:11). Here Paul made the astonishing claim that the same Christ is "*my Lord*" — the awesome Yahweh of

Scripture was Paul's Lord. No wonder all his credits slid to the debit column. Paul knew Christ Jesus in close intimate relationship, and that superseded everything.

The apostle summarized the accounting loss-gain thoughts in the next sentence: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (v. 8b). Paul lost not only his incredible human assets but everything that went with it — his own view of himself, his status, his friendships, his wealth, his assured position in life. And on top of that, he embraced a life of epic hardship and abuse unique in the history of the world (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

In truth, he counted it all as rubbish — using a crude expletive by first-century standards. Paul's former accomplishments had become abhorrent to him, not because they were bad (for they were not), but because they kept him from Christ.

And he had no regrets. John Calvin noted that when people battling a storm at sea cast their belongings overboard to lighten the ship, they wail afterward at the loss.¹⁰ But Paul did not look back. There was no hidden longing. Why? Because he will gain Christ in that final great day when his goal is fully realized. To die will be gain (cf. 1:21)!

Paul's new dependence. As Paul looked to the final day when he will gain Christ, he further desired to "be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (v. 9). While Paul pursued a righteous life in everything, he had no desire for self-righteousness of his own making. He was done with that.

What he most desired was the righteousness that "comes through faith in Christ," or more accurately, "that comes through *the faithfulness of Christ*."¹¹ The righteousness that he possessed came from Christ's faithful obedience to the Father on the cross as he drank the cup of death to the full for our sins.¹² It is all grace because of Christ's faithful work. Paul was saying that "he [Christ] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy" (Titus 3:5).

This righteousness is brought about by Christ's faithfulness but is appropriated by human faith — "the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Philippians 3:9b). This is saving faith because it includes abandoning all those things with which we would credit ourselves, relying instead on the faithful work of Christ.

What a mercifully powerful message to those who may be tempted to mix a legalistic regimen with the gospel of grace. Paul's credentials were matchless and unassailable. He was born with it all! Even more, his accomplishments were stratospheric. He was actually "blameless" under the Pharisaic legal system. But his encounter with Christ showed it all to be

loss. What about us, so far removed from the first-century church and the wolf packs treading the trade routes to their doorsteps? As Carson says:

Most who read these pages, I suspect, will not be greatly tempted to boast about their Jewish ancestry and ancient rights of race and religious heritage. But we may be tempted to brag about still less important things: our wealth, our status, our education, our emotional stability, our families, our political or business successes, our denominational alignments, or even about which version of the Bible we use. Be careful of people like that. They tend to regard everyone who is outside their little group as somehow inferior. Somewhere along the way they inadvertently — or even intentionally and maliciously — imagine that faith in Christ Jesus and delight in him is a little less important than their personal accomplishments.

Instead, look around for those whose constant confidence is Jesus Christ, whose constant boast is Jesus Christ, whose constant delight is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the center of their worship, the center of their gratitude, the center of their love, the center of their hope . . . emulate those whose constant confidence and boast is in Christ Jesus and in nothing else.¹³

Our only boast, our only confidence, our only hope must be in Christ. Paul went on to say, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10, 11). That’s the passion that flows through this entire passage. We must emulate those whose constant confidence and boast is in Christ Jesus and in nothing else. He is our only hope.

. . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (3:10, 11)

16

Paul's Desire to Know Christ Fully

PHILIPPIANS 3:10, 11

The long paragraph that makes up Philippians 3:1-11 pulses with passion from beginning to end. It begins with Paul's heated warnings, "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (v. 2). Then Paul listed his seven righteous superiorities that left him "blameless" under the Law, only to reject them with the emotional and indelicate expletive *skubala* — "rubbish" (v. 8). The paragraph concludes with the apostle's near explosive words over and against those who would attempt to bring the Philippians under the Law — "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (vv. 10, 11). Paul passionately asserted that the cross-centered life is the life of true righteousness in the sense of "right living."¹

There is simply no way these words can be read with clinical detachment if they are read properly. The Apostle Paul's mission and life-desire was enshrined in this eloquent conclusion. As such, it is the favorite text of many Christians. Years ago I memorized it in the Greek, regardless of the fact that a mere technical reading of the text will not help my soul. In fact, though I know these verses well and sometimes pen them beside my signature, I fall far short of Paul's heart — even though I have prayed these lines for years.

TO KNOW CHRIST (v. 10A)

Paul writes in 3:10 "That I may know him." It had been thirty years since his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road where he once and for all

came to know Christ. So “that I may know him” expresses the longing of a heart that already knows Christ — and in fact has known Christ more intimately than most of us! To know Christ was the overarching and unfolding ambition of Paul’s life — a longing for an ever-deepening, ever-widening, personal knowledge of the Son. This passion to know him was what energized Paul’s dogged devotion and his epic quest to take the gospel to the ends of the earth — “spires away on the world’s end,” as John Masefield puts it in his poem “The Seekers.” The apostle’s intense longing was born of love because love makes us want to know another more and more — just as in a good marriage we come to know another as “a true blood relative even closer . . . than father or mother.”² The apostle’s love-born desire was to know Christ in such a way that his life was so fully identified with that of his Savior that it radiated him.

Paul’s longing has set the example for the church for more than two millennia. If you have anything of the same desire, make this your prayer: “I want to know you, Lord — to really know you.”

TO KNOW HIS POWER AND FELLOWSHIP (v. 10B)

The apostle now unfolded his desire to know Christ in two closely linked expressions that form a single dynamic thought³ — literally, “the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings.” These two principles — power and fellowship — mutually interpret each other.

His power. First, there is “the power of his resurrection.” Two thousand years ago on the first day of the week, Christ’s cold body lay on chilled stone in the arms of death. His heart was stilled in the icy grip of the grave, whatever blood remained was congealed in his veins, his eyes were fixed and dilated, and his body was bound tightly with spices and graveclothes. Then, before dawn, his vacant eyes blinked open and coursed with light, focused and glittering life. And with the ease of omnipotence, his body left the wrappings like an empty cocoon.

“The power of his resurrection” is *God’s* power, his life-giving power that he deployed in raising Christ from the dead, and the power that God uses to bring about and sustain the new life that the Christian receives from Christ and shares with him.⁴ Conversion is, in fact, described in the New Testament as a *resurrection*. As Paul explained to the Ephesians, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (2:1, 2). We were condemned in our sinfulness. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in

Christ Jesus” (vv. 4-6). It takes nothing less than God’s creational power to effect such a change in us. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ [when he created the world], has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Conversion is a resurrection effected by the creation power of God himself.

Paul experienced this power when he was transformed from his self-righteous way of life to become a humble follower of Christ. And now he desired to live his present life in the same God-given power — “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Ephesians 1:19, 20). Indeed, this is the way Paul lived — with resurrection power.

*Squeezed but not squashed;
bewildered but not befuddled;
pursued but not abandoned;
knocked down but not knocked out.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8, 9, PARAPHRASED BY MERRILL TENNEY

Again, this was resurrection power, as Paul immediately explains: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:10, 11).

Gordon Fee writes:

Paul knows nothing of the rather gloomy stoicism that is so often exhibited in historic Christianity, where the lot of the believer is basically that of “slugging it out in the trenches,” with little or no sense of Christ’s presence and power. On the contrary, the power of Christ’s resurrection was the greater reality for him. So certain was Paul that it had happened — after all, he had been accosted and claimed by the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road — and that Christ’s resurrection guaranteed his own, that he could throw himself into the present with a kind of holy abandon, full of rejoicing and thanksgiving.⁵

The initial telltale sign of knowing Christ is the power of the resurrection — the joy of new life in Christ, the resiliency and buoyancy that comes from spiritual resurrection, holy abandon in serving him. Such was my experience when I came to Christ. I sensed that a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and lightness came to my step, as though I was released

from earth's gravity. All I wanted was to know more of Christ and to tell others about him. All Christians have experienced this in their own way. And, of course, all of this is capped with the expectation of the future great resurrection — when “the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in Him shall be changed, and made like unto His own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself.”⁶

Do you long to know him and the power of his resurrection? If so, you long rightly. That is an apostolic longing. It is a desire that God is pleased to fulfill. Pause and pray, “I want to know him and the power of his resurrection.”

His fellowship. As we noted earlier, “the fellowship of his sufferings” (literal translation; ESV: “may share in his sufferings”) is part and parcel with “the power of the resurrection.” They go hand in hand like Good Friday and Easter.⁷ In tandem they provide the way to knowing him more.

Here is that word again — “fellowship” (*koinonia*) — and its use is definitely not churchy, as in “Let’s have some fellowship” or “That church has good fellowship.” Its first usage in Philippians 1:5 (“your partnership [fellowship] in the gospel”) sounds good enough, and its second occurrence in 1:7 (“partakers [fellowshippers] with me of grace”) sounds even better, as does 2:1 (“any participation [fellowship] in the Spirit”). But “the fellowship of his sufferings” — who wants to join that fellowship? “That church has good suffering. Let’s join.” Actually, the Apostle Paul would join because suffering is essential for knowing Christ in the fullness that Paul desired.

The spiritual reality is this: suffering is the lot of every true believer, a fact that Paul referenced frequently. Luke tells us that he and Paul returned to the churches of Asia Minor, “encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Paul told the Thessalonians, “For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know” (1 Thessalonians 3:3, 4). Paul also informed the Romans that suffering is a prerequisite to being glorified with Christ: . . . and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17).

Most significantly, the apostle told the Philippians explicitly in 1:29, “For it has been granted [literally, graced] to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” Suffering for Christ then is a divine gift. It is a sign of sacred intimacy with Christ. Karl Barth explained of this text, “The grace of being permitted to *believe* in Christ is surpassed by the grace of being permitted to *suffer* for him, of

being permitted to walk the way of Christ with Christ himself to the perfection of fellowship with him.”⁸ The fellowship of Christ's sufferings moves the believer beyond the role of *beneficiary* of Christ's death to a *sharer* in his sufferings (cf. Colossians 1:24). The suffering that comes to a Christian (as a Christian) is not a sign of God's neglect but rather proof that grace is at work in his or her life — sacred intimacy.

There is breathtaking beauty here — namely, that the more a believer becomes like Christ, the more he or she will suffer. Simply put, the fellowship of Christ's sufferings is the fellowship of elevated souls who are growing in their knowledge of Christ. It is a fellowship of continual resurrection and the display of God's power. It is a fellowship of ascent.

We are called with Paul to invite upon ourselves the sufferings of Christ. But who has the courage and temerity to do such a thing? Will it not bring an avalanche of costly sufferings? And who will be able to bear it? The answer is, no one! But we must remember that this desire to fellowship in Christ's sufferings is coupled with the desire to know the power of the resurrection — “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings.” Paul's expression “the power of his resurrection” *precedes* “the fellowship of his sufferings.” The power of Christ's resurrection first provides the strength and motivation for suffering. No man or woman can embrace the fellowship of Christ's sufferings who does not first know the power of Christ's resurrection. If you have come to Christ and know the power of his resurrection, if you've been raised from the dead, if you are experiencing the ongoing resurrection of new life in Christ, you can do it!

Do you or I want to know Christ? Then we must invoke Paul's longing as our own. *Lord God, I want to know Christ in the power of his resurrection and in the fellowship of his sufferings.* Have you ever prayed this? Do so today.

TO BE LIKE HIM (v. 10C)

The other sweeping factor in knowing Christ is “becoming like him in his death” (literally, “being conformed to his death”). Paul coined this compound word — this is the only place it is found. It is a present passive participle. So the sense is that Paul is being conformed to Christ's death by the transforming activity of God and that it is an ongoing process.

This process is best understood as a cycle of dying and rising with Christ, and it is found throughout Paul's letters. As Paul experiences the power of the resurrection and is strengthened to participate in Christ's sufferings, he is being conformed to his death.⁹ Paul's language indicates a process in which personal crosses produce a series of mini-resurrections that take Paul ever deeper in his personal knowledge of Christ. The bottom

line is, Paul wanted to take up his cross and follow Christ; he wanted God to conform him to Christ's death. Jesus was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), and Paul understood that taking up his cross like this is part of knowing the Master.¹⁰

TO ATTAIN RESURRECTION (v. 11)

Paul concluded his desire to know Christ by expressing enigmatically, "that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (v. 11). Was Paul uncertain about his participation in the resurrection? Not at all. The resurrection was certain, but the intervening events were uncertain as to timing and circumstances. Would he die and later rise from the dead? Or would he remain alive and undergo transformation to his new resurrection body?

What he did know emphatically is that he would experience resurrection "out from among the dead" (literal translation). And what would be his great prize? Certainly a new body and certainly everlasting life. But that is not the prize that he so coveted. The prize he wanted was Christ himself.

When Saul of Tarsus experienced the righteousness that comes through the faithfulness of Christ ("the righteousness of God that depends on faith," v. 9), he cast away all of his accomplishments that had rendered him "blameless" under the Law and threw himself upon Christ. To "know him," then, became the passion of his life. "That I may know him" (v. 10) describes Paul's day-in, day-out, unremitting, relentless, defining pursuit. Paul set his brilliant mind to learning everything about Jesus that he could, seeking him in all the Old Testament Scriptures. Before he came to Christ, Paul was already an expert in the Torah and the sacred writings. Likely he had them in his head! Thus during his early years in Arabia he sought Christ in all the Scriptures, as we see so deftly illustrated in his epistles. Paul also learned all he could from the apostolic band about Christ. Certainly he and Luke talked incessantly about Christ on the long days and nights of their travels. But it was never knowledge *about* Christ that he sought as an end in itself.

All the apostle's powers were concentrated on knowing Christ personally. The power of the resurrection had dazzled him on the road to Damascus, and he never got over it. Every day was his personal resurrection day, an affirmation that he had been raised with Christ. So Paul kept seeking the power of the resurrection as an avenue for knowing Christ more deeply.

This in turn enabled Paul to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and further increase his intimacy and knowledge of him. Indeed, Paul passionately sought the fellowship of his sufferings as a grace for his soul. Therefore, the apostle was continually being conformed to Christ's death by God himself. His life was stamped with the divine imprint of the cross and a growing knowledge of Christ. This meant that Paul looked with confidence

to the indeterminate day of the great resurrection when the full knowledge of Christ would fill his horizon for all eternity.

There is no doubt that if any of us knew today to be the final day of our lives, we would wish that we had made Christ the passion of our existence. But as it is, there is time right now to pray, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Have you ever prayed this? Can you pray this? Will you?

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (3:12-16)

17

One Thing I Do

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

The Apostle Paul's famous declaration of his life's desire was stated in the preceding verses: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (vv. 10, 11). This passionate declaration meant that every day witnessed the apostle's relentless pursuit of an ever-deepening, ever-widening personal knowledge of the Christ whom he had already known intimately for over thirty years. His growing knowledge of Christ involved his constant pursuit of "the power of his resurrection," and part and parcel with that power was the longing for the fellowship of Christ's sufferings because he knew that suffering for Christ is the sacred path to deeper knowledge of him and the perfection of intimate fellowship with him.

There is nothing in Scripture quite like this explosion of spiritual longing. And Paul's passionate longing is meant to serve as an example for all Christians. We are called to make his passion for Christ our own. Dare we ask for this? Will we pray for it? That remains the great question for every Christian.

PAUL'S CONFESSION AND RESOLVE (v. 12)

The mere statement of Paul's daunting desire places the apostle in a stratosphere by himself. And we lesser mortals might imagine that Paul attained it over the dynamic years of his epic life.

Confession. But Paul was quick to confess that this was simply not the case because he immediately interjected, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect" (v. 12a). His language here is arresting because he

literally said, “Not that I have already received” (without referencing the object), so that the sense is much the same as in English when we say, “Not that I have arrived,” stressing the incompleteness of his spiritual journey.¹ Paul had not “received,” and neither was he “perfect.” This was conscious reality for the apostle. Paul was under no illusions about his attainments and would not promote fictions about his having become “perfect.” So we immediately observe that Paul’s magnificent quest to know Christ fully was matched by a magnificent humility.

However, while Paul was most humble, he was also very subtle because by raising the subject of perfection, he was co-opting the pious language of his opponents. Paul’s enemies claimed to have reached a state of perfection that made them possessors of all the blessings of salvation, in effect the arrival of Heaven itself.² Heavenly perfection was theirs now, they argued. If we imagine that “we have Heaven now” is a far-fetched notion, we must understand that certain groups today claim the same thing — namely, that “mature” Christians will stay healthy and enjoy material prosperity and wholly overcome sin. TV preacher Kenneth Copeland, who preaches freedom from sickness and poverty, proclaims, “The world’s shortages have no effect on someone who has already gone to heaven. Therefore, they should have no effect on us here who have made Jesus Lord of our lives.”³

But Paul’s confession allowed no such thinking, then or now. Here the Apostle Paul, the most spectacular Christian who ever lived, confessed that he had not arrived or become “perfect.” Paul admitted his own need to grow into maturity. His confession stands as a warning against a super-spiritual kind of Christianity that imagines that the blessings of the age to come can be had now before the resurrection.

The reality is, the more we come to know Christ, the more we will come to sense our need to grow. And when we imagine that we have arrived, stagnation sets in. We must understand that Paul’s prayer — “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” — is a prayer of humble dissatisfaction that opens us to the blessing of God — and to a sublime cycle of dissatisfaction and satisfaction and dissatisfaction and satisfaction. . . . It brings on a life that knows more and more of Christ and then desperately wants to know more and indeed does know more and more and more and more. Spiritual dissatisfaction is a blessed state. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6). Do you long to know Christ better? If so, blessing rains upon your soul.

Resolve. Paul’s humble confession — “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect” — brings forth something remarkable. It births a mighty resolve in Paul: “but I press on to make it my own, because Christ

Jesus has made me his own” (v. 12b). We see how gritty Paul’s resolve is in the original Greek, which is tinged with violence: “but I pursue [it] if indeed I may seize [it], because indeed I have been seized by Christ Jesus.” Paul’s “language comes from the world of war and athletics” (Thielman). In fact, in a battle report the ancient historian Herodotus used the same words Paul used to describe an army’s *pursuit* and *seizure* of the retreating columns of the enemy.⁴ Paul’s rough-and-tumble words explicitly pointed to his conversion on the Damascus Road where the risen, exalted Christ seized him for his own. As Paul trod the road near Damascus, the mighty hand of Christ reached down, seized him by the scruff of his robe, and set him on the path to Ananias’s house and then to Arabia and then to the Gentile world as its great apostle. Here Paul expressed his desire to “know” the risen Christ because he was in the grip of Christ’s grace! Paul’s whole pursuit of Christ was Christ-originated, Christ-motivated, and Christ-propelled.

The present tense Paul used describes an ongoing, grasping, strenuous pursuit. It is a gritty, “I will not be denied,” rough-and-tumble pursuit — a sublime violence — which Christ approved and approves of. He said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). This is how it was with John the Baptist when he burst from the wilderness clad in his leathers, fiercely heralding the kingdom. So it was with the paralytic’s friends when they tore through the roof in Capernaum to get him to Jesus (cf. Mark 2:4). Gracious, loving violence.

Brothers and sisters, if you have been seized by Christ and are in the grip of his grace, you must press on in your own hot, grasping pursuit of an ever-deeper knowledge of him. The gospel allows no room for a bland, middle-class ethic that strives to be neither hot nor cold (cf. Revelation 3:14-16). We are all called (every mother, daughter, father, son) to a single-minded, determined pursuit of Christ.

If you have been grasped by grace, God is speaking to you right now. Do you hear him? Pursue! Seize! Take hold of Christ as he has taken hold of you. This is the only way to live. No fainting hearts permitted.

PAUL’S PURSUIT (vv. 13, 14)

As Paul increased his intensity, he sensed that just one disclaimer was not enough. So he repeated himself in a more personal manner: “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own” (v. 13a). Or literally, “I myself do not consider that I have seized it.” “No way have I arrived!” — that is the sense. And Paul knew that to be fact. This was not the subjective confession of an oversensitive, overwrought soul who is blinded to his own

progress. Rather, it was grounded in facts that are verifiable. He had not attained to the perfection of the resurrection of the dead.⁵

One thing! That is why he was so intense here — “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (vv. 13b, 14).

“But one thing I do” introduces a single sentence that draws on the metaphor of a foot race described in the graphic present tense but with clauses that reference the *past* (“forgetting what lies behind”), the *future* (“and straining forward to what lies ahead”), and the *present* (“I press on toward the goal”). It is a picture of absolute focus and intensity.

Past. On August 7, 1954, during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada, the greatest mile-run matchup ever took place. It was touted as the “miracle mile” because Britisher Roger Bannister and Australian John Landy were the only two sub-four-minute milers in the world. Bannister had been the first man ever to run a four-minute mile. Both runners were in peak condition. I remember as a junior high boy carefully turning the pages, examining the photos of the famous runners in *Life* magazine, and absorbing the statistics and predictions. Roger Bannister, M.D., who became Sir Roger Bannister and master of an Oxford college, strategized that he would relax during the third lap and save everything for his finishing drive. But as they began that third lap, the Australian poured it on, stretching his already substantial lead. Immediately Bannister adjusted his strategy, increasing his pace and gaining on Landy.

The lead was quickly cut in half, and at the bell for the final lap they were even. Landy began running even faster, and Bannister followed suit. Both men were flying. Bannister felt he was going to lose if Landy did not slow down. Then came the famous moment (replayed thousands of times in print and flickering black and white celluloid) as at the last stride before the home stretch the crowds roared. Landy could not hear Bannister’s footfall and looked back, a fatal lapse of concentration. Bannister launched his attack and won the Empire Games that day by five yards.

John Landy’s lapse was as old as antiquity. The sports-knowledgeable Apostle Paul would have seen Landy’s mistake in a flash because he knew that to be successful a runner must not look back over his shoulder — he must “forget what lies behind” — because when a runner turns even slightly to glance back, there is a momentary loss of focus and rhythm, incurring the critical loss of a fraction of a second or even seconds.

Was the apostle suggesting a blanket of amnesia over the past? No. Paul’s extensive writings reveal a remarkable memory of people and events. In one place he reminded the Corinthians of his “anxiety for all the churches,” indicating that his heart rose and fell with their ups and downs

(2 Corinthians 11:28, 29). The final chapter of Romans reveals a mind and memory that functioned like a mental GPS — Paul lists no less than thirty-three names of people from all over the ancient world who he knew to be in Rome, though he had not yet been to the Eternal City.

Thus Paul's "forgetting what lies behind" is a special kind of forgetfulness, the kind that does not turn and glance back from the goal to indulge in the complacency of past achievements. That would have been easy for him to do if he yielded to it. He had been *the man*, the heroic apostle amidst beatings and betrayals and shipwrecks and danger upon danger. His epic life is truly without parallel. He was, and remains, *the theologian* of the church. More, he was *the missionary* to the Gentiles, the missionary-general of the early church. The apostle could boast of a trailing ring of established churches, shining as lights across the darkness of Asia and Europe. But Paul chose not to look back on his accomplishments lest they diminish his focus or lull him into complacency or indifference. And we must also understand that he did not allow his failures to turn his head to the fatal backward look. To be sure, there were many sad episodes there for Paul to recollect if he let himself.

But there was none of this. As Paul ran, he shifted into the high gear of forgetfulness — forgetting his achievements and his failures. Paul ran in the liberating freedom of his "one thing" (v. 13). He was flying in his forgetfulness.

There is instruction for everyone here across the spectrum of age and experience. For those who have some miles on them and are battle-worn and perhaps have some striking accomplishments, God calls you to selective amnesia so that you will not be lulled from your stride. For all, young and old, do not look back. Lift up your eyes. Look straight ahead. Focus.

Future. As the first clause describes the runner not looking back over his shoulder, the second pictures him "straining forward to what lies ahead" with all that he has. Peter O'Brien observes that this is "a vivid word, drawn from the games, and it pictures a runner with his eyes fixed on the goal, his hand stretching out towards it, and his body bent forward as he enters the last and decisive stages of the race. Again, the present tense of the participle is appropriate, for with this verb it powerfully describes the runner's intense desire and utmost effort to reach his goal."⁶ Our imaginations easily flesh out the picture: the runner's breathing has become shallow and fast as he runs flat out for the finish, his legs are drumming like pistons, his feet pound the course with painful thunder — his throat dry, his stomach groaning, he lays himself out for the finish, sweat flying, his outstretched hands flailing the air.

Present. With the final clause, the goal (the finish line)⁷ comes in view as Paul concludes, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call

of God in Christ Jesus” (v. 14). “It is the vision of the end of the race that ever directs and speeds his hastening feet” (J. H. Michael).⁸ In terms of the modern athlete, he sees the yellow stripe fifty yards ahead, and his adrenaline jolts for the final last-gasp kick. He runs faster, his arms pumping, pushing off his toes.

He runs for “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (v. 14c). What is the “upward call”? It is the “full and complete gaining of Christ for whose sake everything else has been counted as loss” (O’Brien).⁹ For Paul, the greatest reward was to know Christ fully and to experience perfect fellowship with him — “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (vv. 10, 11). This is the prize that Paul wanted his readers to seize.

The year was 1923, and the competing track teams of Scotland and France were neck and neck. But among the events remaining was the 440. As the runners, clad in traditional 1920s white, came to the first turn, they were bunched tight, shoulder to shoulder, when one of them was pushed to the ground and off the track. For a second he was down — and then up again, running (though twenty meters behind), his knees high, his head back — flying. And as the leaders sprinted to the finish line, he emerged ahead to win! It was a famous win, immortalized in the movie *Chariots of Fire*.

What would most runners have done? Most would have waved a fist, dusted themselves off, and watched the outcome. Perhaps there would have been a few words exchanged after the race. But the athlete in question was beyond the ordinary. It was as if he had been reading this passage — forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I focus all my energy on the race; and seeing the goal, I fly to the finish.¹⁰

This is the way everyone who is in the grip of Christ’s grace must live. Listen to Paul’s explanation to the Corinthians: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Apart from a failing mind or body, we are called to relentlessly press on toward the finish line for the full and complete gaining of Christ, the resurrection, and ultimate perfection. Getting old and tired? Put the pedal to the metal. Young and full of boundless energy? Be a man or woman of “one thing.”

PAUL’S ADVICE (vv. 15, 16)

Paul concluded with some gentle and wise advice: “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained” (vv. 15, 16). Mature people don’t think they are perfect or have arrived. Those who

are mature refuse themselves even a satisfied glance back at spiritual attainments. Instead, forgetting what is behind, they pour their energies into the pursuit of the full knowledge of Christ. They run the race rather than imagine it is over. Paul's confident assertion that if any of them thought otherwise, God would reveal it to them was not a smug assertion that if necessary they would learn "the hard way." Rather, he meant that if his brothers and sisters in Philippi had some flaws in their Christian understanding, God himself would graciously correct it. Paul trusted the Spirit of God to bring his people to the knowledge of the truth.¹¹

May I say that if you think Paul is a little extreme, if you think that after years of Christian living, you will somehow arrive, if you think a time is coming on earth when your knowledge of Christ will be full and satisfying, if you think that a time will come when you can ease up — you're wrong! We are to fly after him in the spring, the summer, the autumn, and the dead of winter.

One final word from Paul: "Only let us hold true to what we have attained" (v. 16). Notice that he included himself with the readers — he said "us" rather than "you." The exact sense is, "Only let us keep in step with what we have attained." Paul wanted them to continue together in accord with the same passion to know Christ. They must not depart from the progress they have made in their pursuit of Christ.¹² This is a fitting word to each of us who love Christ.

Paul's passionate declaration — "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (vv. 10, 11) — calls us all to a passionate, grasping pursuit of Christ.

Eric Liddell, "the Flying Scotsman," was already famous when he made his phenomenal comeback to win the 440 in the Scotland-France meet. And his fame increased as a runner and a Christian, especially at the Paris Olympics in 1924 where he refused to run in his best events (the 100 meters and the 4 x 100 relay) because they were run on Sunday. *Chariots of Fire* inaccurately portrays this as a last-minute decision in Paris, whereas he actually decided well in advance and began to train for the 200 and 400 meter races.¹³ Liddell took a bronze in the 200 and amazed the world by winning the 400 in the world-record time of 47.6 seconds, five meters ahead of the silver medalist — he was truly flying!

Runner he was, but that was only one manifestation of his devotion to Christ. In 1925, having completed his degree in science at Edinburgh and a degree in divinity, he set sail as a missionary to China with the China Inland Mission. In 1932, during his first furlough, he married Florence Mackenzie. In 1941, facing the growing threat of Japanese occupation, he sent his wife and three daughters to Canada to stay with her family while he stayed on to

serve among the poor. Liddell suffered many hardships but kept on running hard after Christ. And then in 1943 he was interned in the Weih sien Internment Camp where he again cheerfully served those around him. In 1945, at the age of forty-three, Eric Liddell died of a brain tumor that may have been caused by his malnourishment and overwork. Liddell's grave was marked by a simple wooden cross, with his name written in boot polish.¹⁴ He is interred in the Mausoleum of Martyrs in Shijiazhuang, China.¹⁵

I do not know what the inscription says. But if I were to imagine one, it would be:

HE DIED RUNNING

Here was a man whose life was given to one thing. "Forgetting what lay behind and straining forward to what lay ahead, [he] press[ed] on for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

May we all die running for and with Jesus!

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. (3:17 — 4:1)

18

Stand Firm

PHILIPPIANS 3:17 — 4:1

The Apostle Paul's mighty call to a lifelong pursuit of knowing Christ fully peaked with his declaration of relentless determination: "One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (vv. 13, 14). This fervent expression was meant to motivate the Philippians to the same hard-charging pursuit — a life of running after Jesus. Paul wanted his readers to "stand firm," as he had expressed earlier in 1:27 ("so that . . . I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit") and would later command ("stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved," 4:1). The reason for these admonitions to "stand firm" is that dark forces had already taken their toll on the little church, as Paul would soon explain.

A CALL TO IMITATION (v. 17)

What does Paul commend to the Philippians first in this matter of standing firm? Surprisingly, imitation. "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." To casual readers, this may not sound like the voice of humility. However, there is no self-promoting ego here calling everyone to focus on his example as the sole model for action, because the call to imitation is larger than Paul himself. Notice that Paul says, "and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" — the "us" includes Timothy and Epaphroditus whom Paul had held high as spiritual models in chapter 2. Also remember that these excellent men had followed the example of Christ by not seeking their own interests but rather the interests of others (cf. 2:4, 20, 21). They, like Paul, pursued hard after Christ. They were men of "one thing" (3:13).

Thus the apostle is calling the Philippians to join together¹ in imitating both himself and the collective pattern of his fellow soldiers, including the men and women in the Philippian church who walked according to the example of those who indeed pursued Christ.

We all know that we learn by watching others. Young Johann Sebastian Bach was a studied observer of the great organist and composer Dietrich Buxtehude. Bach made repeated long trips on foot to Buxtehude's church to observe and hear the master, even copying the composer's scores by hand — all of which had a marked effect on Bach's style and vitality and the shaping of his brilliance. Bach, surpassing genius that he was, rode on the lesser genius and example of his mentor.² So it is in every area from the arts to the trades to business to sports. I remember as a high school boy how my tennis would improve after watching top-flight collegiate or professional players. This is how it works with golf and basketball and art and the professions and the church — especially the church.

Today Paul's passionate longing echoes down to us — "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (3:10, 11). We also hear his "one thing I do" resolve: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:13b, 14). Paul's example draws us upward. But along with this we must have the collective example of the church. We need the example of the Eric Liddells, men who died running. We need pastors and missionaries and elders who walk according to the example of Paul and the apostolic band.

It is of greatest importance that those of us in leadership not descend to be professionals — that we constantly desire to know Christ and "the power of his resurrection" and the fellowship of his sufferings — that we "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call" with all our being. This is what children and youth and students need to see — living examples to imitate. I say this especially to my fellow ministers, elders, youth workers, and children's workers. Those who pursue Christ will produce those who pursue Christ. And it is only those who continue to run after Christ who will stand firm.

WARNING ABOUT APOSTASY (vv. 18, 19)

Enemies. We immediately see why Paul's call to imitation is so urgent because, tragically, many live as enemies of the cross. "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18). They are the exact opposite of Paul's example. Their walk is the antithesis to Paul's walk — and there are many of them.

Evidently these enemies were at one time professed Christians, perhaps ex-members of the Philippian church, and still around. Philippi was a small place. Likely these men had regular contact with most of the congregation. The intensity of Paul's tearful grief indicates that their apostasy had been a very personal loss to Paul. Literally Paul says, "I speak weeping." There were tears as he dictated or penned this letter. Evidence that these former converts had become "enemies of the cross of Christ" is indicated by the way they now walked. Their lifestyles repudiated all that the cross stands for, specifically the passionate pursuit of Christ and a cross-centered life of suffering. It was all foolishness to them. I've personally known some like this during the forty years of my ministry who are now lethal enemies of the body of Christ.

Enemies' end. Paul described the destiny and character of these enemies with four brief (verb-less in the original), appalling expressions.³

The first was intended to shock because it was the language of perdition⁴ — "Their end is destruction" (v. 19; cf. 1:28). These people had faces and names familiar, and even beloved, to the Philippians. Nevertheless, the great judgment would effect their eternal damnation because of their cross-denying behavior.

Paul explained that this was because "their god is their belly" (v. 19). It was not merely the pleasures of the stomach that was their god, but the bodily desires and sensual delights that displaced the divine and became their god. The Philippian apostates were digging their graves with their own teeth as they chewed upon their earthbound impulses and the cud of personal pleasure. The pursuit of creature comforts displaced the pursuit of Christ and the cross. Today the professed Christian whose own physical and personal needs come before the Lord, whose bodily comforts (what and where he eats, how and where he lives, and what he spends to satisfy his own pleasures) displace the cross, had better take note because his god has become his belly. Beware of any pleasure that impedes the passionate pursuit of Christ.

Such people, said Paul, also "glory in their shame" (v. 19). This refers to sensual excesses, especially sexual ones, the immoral practices of pagan, pre-Christian lives. This is how many of today's neo-pagans live and glory. As Malcolm Muggeridge wrote:

Sex is the mysticism of a materialist society, with its own mysteries . . . and its own sacred texts and scripture — the erotica that fall like black atomic rain on the just and unjust alike, drenching us, blinding us, stupefying us. To be carnally minded is life!⁵

But Paul said that to be thus-minded is death — desolate, impenetrable night.

Lastly, their “minds [are] set on earthly things” (v. 19). Their whole inner disposition was governed by the earthly sphere of sin.

The effect of these four terse descriptions is to show that the enemies of the cross had come full circle.⁶ By abandoning the pursuit of Christ and the cross, their minds once again were set on pre-Christian things rather than on “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (v. 14). “They stand diametrically opposed to those whose commonwealth is in heaven.”⁷

Paul’s message to us is this: the way we live, our walk, our appetites, the things in which we revel, the set of our inner disposition all tell whether we are Christian or post-Christian. We should note that Paul, who had much to say about the nature of authentic faith in other places (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 3:21, 22, 28; 10:5-13), did not say a word about faith here. Here lifestyle revealed the authenticity of professed belief. Taking this warning to heart is essential if we are to stand firm.

ASSURANCE ABOUT HEAVEN (vv. 20, 21)

Having warned the Philippians about the enemies around them, Paul switched from the negative to the ultimate positive: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (vv. 20, 21). We have moved from the earthbound focus of the enemies of the cross to the heavenly realities of the followers of the cross, which provides mighty reasons to stand firm.

Our citizenship. To begin with, the up-front declaration “But our citizenship is in heaven” references a reality already mentioned by Paul in the pivotal text of 1:27: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” “Manner of life” is more exactly “manner of life as citizens” (implicitly, “of heaven”). The same root word that is used there is used here in 3:20 for “citizenship.”

You can hear the similarity in the Greek. In 1:27 it is the verb *politeúes-the*, and here in 3:20 it is the noun *políteuma*. Both are built on the noun *polis*, which means “city.” All kinds of English words come from this: *police*, *metropolis*, *political*, *politician*.

The reality behind both references is that the Philippians were citizens of the commonwealth of Heaven — they belonged to another *polis*, apart from Philippi. This was particularly poignant for the Philippians because Philippi was a singularly self-conscious little Roman *polis* (legally Italian soil), which kept the locals at a distance while at the same time intruding into their lives.

In fact, the Philippians did not have full citizenship in the Roman-run town. But that was not a problem — they were full citizens of the heavenly commonwealth. That was their present ongoing reality. And they had to

hold on to it as a means of standing firm. This is likewise true for each of us who know and follow Christ. It is a present-tense reality.

Our eager expectation. As we look to the next line of Paul's thought, the poignancy deepened for the Philippian church because, in distinction from the imperial cult worship of Caesar as its savior, that church eagerly awaited its "Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

This title is the highest of all names, the name already proclaimed in Christ's super-exaltation in 2:9-11: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The ultimate confession of the universe will be that Jesus, Messiah, is Yahweh, the awesome God who created the heavens and the earth, the one who sets up kings and takes them down (cf. Isaiah 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 22, 23) — the Savior.

Our transformation. And what will be the outcome when the Savior comes? He "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (v. 21). That which awaits believers is a radical transformation not just of our physical bodies but of our whole person as a totality.⁸

The change will be necessary because our weak mortal bodies are insufficient to receive and participate in the glorious state. Furthermore, our lowly bodies will be transformed "to be like his glorious body," so that our future bodies will be of the same order as Christ's own resurrected glorified body. Christ's resurrected body is the prototype of what awaits each of us. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:49, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven." Murray Harris writes in his classic study *Raised Immortal*:

Paul is saying, then, that in place of an earthly body that is always characterized by physical decay, indignity, and weakness, the resurrected believer will have a heavenly body that is incapable of deterioration, beautiful in form and appearance, and with limitless energy and perfect health. Once he experiences a resurrection transformation, man will know perennial rejuvenation, since he will have a perfect vehicle for God's deathless Spirit, a body that is invariably responsive to his transformed personality.⁹

What further dazzles us here is that it is Christ who does this (not the Father or the Holy Spirit, as we might expect). As Harris says, "To summarise: just as the event of spiritual resurrection is founded exclusively on the resurrection of Christ, so the ensuing state of spiritual resurrection is totally dependent on the risen life of Christ."¹⁰

Paul concluded his thoughts here about Christ's power by stating explicitly that Christ does this "by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (v. 21). This is an allusion to Psalm 8:6, which speaks of God's intention to subject all creation to mankind. So here Christ fulfills mankind's destiny, and in doing so he makes the universe subject to himself. Everything is of Christ!

This section heaps encouragement upon encouragement. The Philippians were citizens of the commonwealth of Heaven in the continuing present. This was not a future denouement but ongoing eternal reality. What an empowering perspective in the midst of the officious Roman untouchousness of the mini-Rome of Philippi. And as citizens of Heaven they didn't await a pale Roman savior, a petty little-caesar, but rather the Savior with a name that is above every other name — Yahweh, Jesus, Messiah — to whom every knee will bow, in Heaven and on earth and under the earth. And this Savior will someday give them bodies like his own glorious body as he subjects everything in the universe to himself. So stand firm.

EXHORTATIONS TO STAND FIRM (4:1)

Now comes the capstone of Paul's thoughts: "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved" (4:1).

This is the most affectionate and endearing language he used anywhere — "brothers" — "beloved" — "long[ed] for." This little church was his favorite. "My joy" (the thirteenth sounding of this merry note) and my "crown" — this is what they were to Paul as he exhorted them, "Stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved." Paul wanted them to run hard after the full knowledge of Christ (cf. 3:10, 11, 13, 14).

In the light of his call to be imitators of the godly examples in their lives and the fourfold warning about those who had gone full circle to become "enemies of the cross of Christ" and then the stunning *assurance* about their citizenship and its glorious outcome, Paul lovingly exhorted his friends to "stand firm." And that is my prayer for you.

May the body of Christ provide you with many examples to follow.

May the lives of the enemies of the cross be cause for tears and alarm.

May the wonders of your citizenship and your future dance in your soul.

And may you "stand firm" in your pursuit of "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:14).

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (4:2-7)

19

Garrisoned by Peace

PHILIPPIANS 4:2-7

Women had played a prominent role in the founding of the churches in Macedonia, and especially at the beginning of the church in Philippi where Lydia, a seller of purple, became Paul's first convert on European soil, and a young slave girl became the first to be delivered from an evil spirit (Acts 16:14-18; cf. 17:4-12).

At present the little church in Philippi was graced by two magnificent women, Euodia and Syntyche, whom Paul memorably described here as having "labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life" (v. 3). These two were no weak sisters by any means because Paul's description employed a gladiatorial term, better rendered as "fought side by side with me."¹ They had been in "the same conflict" as Paul (1:30) in the battle for the gospel, which placed them amidst the fellowship of the gospel (cf. 1:5) — gospel comradeship in the quest to proclaim the good news to the pagan world. These two women, along with a certain Clement and other fellow workers, all had their names in the "book of life" — the great book that will be opened on the Day of Judgment, when only those found in its pages will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Revelation 21:27). Euodia and Syntyche were elect warriors. Their certitudes and commitments to the gospel meant that tension was a daily fact of their existence. Those who follow hard after Christ live with tensions and troubles that the uncommitted heart does not know. And the cloying atmosphere of the small Roman colony took its stressful toll on these excellent women.

We do not know what the trouble was. Perhaps it was the rivalry mentioned in 2:3. In any event, they had a falling-out and were not of the same

mind. As it was, this magnificent duo's conflict was jeopardizing the witness of the very gospel for which they had fought. Perhaps trite but true,

*To live above with the saints we love,
Oh, that will be glory.
But to live below with the saints we know,
Well, that's another story.*

A PLEA FOR PEACE (vv. 2, 3)

A personal plea. The news of the women's falling-out had reached Paul in his Roman jail cell, and here he interrupted the flow of his thought with a personal plea to each, "as if exhorting them singly, face to face (Bengel)²: "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord" (v. 2). He asks that they literally "think the same thing in the Lord." If anyone was nodding off in the Philippian assembly while the letter was being read, they were awake now! Certainly Paul was gentle, diplomatic, and respectful, but to be named thus in the letter by the great apostle — all eyes were now upon the two women.

Intervention please. And there was more because Paul asked for intervention by a third party: "Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women" (v. 3a). Over the centuries speculations as to who the third party, the "true companion" (literally, "true yokefellow"), was has been endless. But the most responsible guesses have been that he was a leader in the church to whom the letter was sent as the designated reader. Everyone knew who the true yokefellow was, but we do not. Most likely he was a leading elder in the church, or possibly Luke.³ Luke was with Paul early in his Roman imprisonment, but this letter does not mention him — perhaps because he had returned to Macedonia and was in Philippi.⁴

Whoever this well-known yokefellow was, his duty was most clear: he was to "help" (that is, take hold of together, assist) "these women" — which suggests that the women may have already taken steps toward mending their discord.⁵ The apostle didn't lay out a precise remedy for Euodia and Syntyche but handed it over to the church family in Philippi. He gave them tender guidelines and was diplomatic and encouraging. But what is clear is that the church and its leadership were to help Euodia and Syntyche. These women were to be helped by their brothers and sisters, using their prayers and corporate wisdom.

Did the women respond? Very likely, especially if they took Paul's immediately following imperatives to heart because they are a prescription for the peace and well-being of the whole body of Christ.⁶ This is one of the most memorized texts in the entire Bible. The King James Version with its "careful for nothing" and "passeth" has been with me for fifty years.

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (4:4-7, KJV)

IMPERATIVES FOR PEACEFUL LIVING (vv. 4-7)

Rejoice. Karl Barth, in a brief survey of the commands to rejoice in the book of Philippians, noted that we meet the command first in 2:18 where Paul tells the Philippians that they “should be glad and rejoice” with him, and then again in 3:1: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.” And, lastly, here in 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

From the force of these three commands, Barth concludes that “‘joy’ in Philippians is a defiant ‘Nevertheless!’”⁷ — nevertheless “Rejoice.” Paul’s unqualified “Rejoice” certainly does defy the thankless, complaining nature of humanity and human custom through all of history.

Also, remember that Paul wasn’t writing while he lounged in a Roman bath or sipped espresso in Café Roma. We must never forget that Paul delivered his defiant command to rejoice whatever the circumstances when it was unsure whether he would live or die and while he was confined to helplessly watching his competitors and enemies make advances among the churches of Rome and Philippi. As if to answer any question from those who might ask incredulously, “Should we really rejoice during afflictions?” he stated twice, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Get it?

Note also that the apostle’s words allow for no loopholes — “always” permits no exceptions regardless of how humiliating or painful things might be. Similarly, the readers are commanded to find their joy “in the Lord” rather than in their circumstances. As such, Christian “joy is a basic and constant orientation of the Christian life, the fruit and evidence of a relationship with the Lord” (Bockmuehl).⁸ It comes from what the Lord has done in the past, from what he is doing now, and from the hope of what he will do in the future.

Blaise Pascal, the mathematical genius, physicist, Christian thinker, inventor, and literary stylist — one of the great minds of human history — had an experience that changed the course of his life. The experience was so pivotal that he wrote it down and had it sewn into his jacket. What Pascal wrote was this:

In the year of Grace, 1654,
On Monday, 23rd of November . . .

From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve

FIRE

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

“Thy God shall be my God.”

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God.

He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel. . . .

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. . . .

“This is eternal life, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and the one whom Thou has sent, Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I have separated myself from Him: I have fled from Him, denied Him, crucified Him.

Let me never be separated from Him.

We keep hold of Him only by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Renunciation, total and sweet.

Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.

Eternally in joy for a day’s exercise on earth. . . .⁹

Poignantly, Pascal inscribed this experience on a piece of parchment as a *Mémorial* and had it sewn under the lining of his successive coats until the end of his life.¹⁰ Thus, Pascal always bore close to his heart the memory of the fiery joy of his conversion. Perhaps during needy times he felt for the parchment to steady his fainting soul.

Blaise Pascal’s *Mémorial* was rooted in the Biblical reality that “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10), and here the great apostle calls us to “Rejoice.” Those who set their hearts to “Rejoice in the Lord always” will not only “stand firm” (4:1) but will be receptive to “the peace of God” (v. 7) that overcomes the discords that attack the body of Christ (vv. 2, 3). “When we persistently rejoice, we become open to God and open to what he can do in our lives” (Ogilvie).¹¹ Rejoicing in the Lord is not a luxury — it is a necessity!

Until the Lord comes back, all of us are going to experience excruciating stresses, interpersonal woes, humiliating sicknesses, our own deaths, and if we live long enough, the wrenching deaths of loved ones and friends. But in every and all circumstances, we are to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” How so? At the very foundation we must press close the fiery record of the joy of our salvation. We must take David’s words to heart as they were fulfilled by the ultimate Son of David:

*He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God. (Psalm 40:2, 3)*

Because Christ has saved us, we concur with the Apostle Peter, “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8, 9). Hold the fire close, and you will rejoice.

And, of course, there is more to rejoice in because all of us have a history of sweet providences that both trail in our wake and grace our present lives — deliverances from harm and death, daily provisions for living, loved ones and various people whom God has placed in our way — all these are causes for ongoing rejoicing. And as we look to the hope of his coming, we cannot do anything but rejoice.

So in this world of woe, God’s Word commands us to embrace a defiant “Nevertheless!” — “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (v. 4). No exceptions. No muted praise. Because of what Christ has done, “we may rejoice, we will rejoice, we must rejoice, for we rejoice in the Lord . . . always” (Carson).¹²

Be gentle. The second imperative that Paul commands — “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone” (v. 5a) — introduces the relational quality that rejoicing produces. The word behind “reasonableness” has been translated many ways. William Tyndale’s 1525 translation has it, “Let your softness be known to all men,” and that idea is very appropriate. The King James Version renders it “moderation.” The ESV has “reasonableness.” I am convinced that the best rendering is, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” Paul was enjoining the gentleness that comes from the character of Christ himself, as we see in 2 Corinthians 10:1 where Paul appeals to the Corinthians “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Indeed, Jesus used the same word to describe himself saying, “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29).¹³ And here in the context of Philippians, the gentleness of Christ is in view — the one who did not “grasp” his own rights (cf. 2:6).

The sequence of Paul’s opening commands first to rejoice and second to be gentle tell us that the most immediate outward expression of a rejoicing heart is Christlike gentleness toward all people, which necessarily involves the patient bearing of abuse. Within the church this gentleness or softness or sweet reasonableness will prevent and moderate the kind of rift that occurred between Euodia and Syntyche. Even the surrounding world

finds this softness and gentleness winsome and inviting. A rejoicing spirit is a gentle spirit and a healing balm to the church and the world.

When we recite the imperatives (perhaps too quickly) — “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness [gentleness] be known to everyone” — it is easy to miss the brief assertion that follows — “the Lord is at hand” (literally, “the Lord is near,” just two words in the Greek). However, “the Lord is near” radiates with a light that energizes Paul’s commands because both the Philippians’ joy and their gentleness, as well as the following command (“do not be anxious”), were grounded in the fact that “the Lord is at hand.” His nearness causes us to rejoice; his nearness effects gentleness; his nearness allays anxiety.

Does “the Lord is at hand” refer to time — that his return is near — or to his proximity — that he is near to us? Likely the apostle had both time and space in view. The Lord may return at any time, and he is continually near his people.

He is near, in fact ever present. He is never merely spatially here or there because he carries us here and there in his heart.¹⁴

*Over all, and not ascending,
Under all, but not depending;
Over all the world ordaining,
Under all, the world sustaining.*

HILDEBERT OF TOURS¹⁵

Jesus Christ is closer than our breath, and he is returning soon! Think of it and rejoice! Think of it and be gentle!

Don’t worry. Think of this, and don’t worry because the next imperative is, “do not be anxious about anything.” Again, Paul wasn’t lounging under a palm on the Isle of Capri sipping a cool drink, dictating, “Don’t worry, be happy!” No detachment here. Paul’s whole existence was on the bubble; danger was everywhere. Few things were going right for him, humanly speaking. So understand that the apostle’s command came with feeling. In fact, he literally declared, “stop worrying about anything!” — which assumes that the Philippians were anxiously wringing their hands. Indeed, as residents of Philippi they had more things to worry about than we do — poverty, hunger, ostracism, interlopers, *agents provocateurs*, heretics, and a very Roman “city hall.” Nevertheless, Paul’s absolute prohibition of worry stood and comes down to us with full force.

Paul’s command is an echo of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples in Matthew 6:25-34. There Jesus identified worry as simply pagan (v. 32) and asked his hearers to consider the birds of the air as examples of God’s provision, then

asked, “Are you not of more value than they?” (v. 26). Here it may be helpful to imagine how the birds consider us.

*Said the robin to the sparrow:
“I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.”*

*Said the sparrow to the robin:
“Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.”¹⁶*

Three times Jesus forbade worry: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious [worry] about your life” (v. 25) — “So do not be anxious [worry]” (v. 31) — “Therefore do not be anxious [worry] about tomorrow” (v. 34). And Paul cuts to the chase, “Stop worrying about anything!”

Pray. The corollary to not worrying is to take up Paul’s following command to pray: “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (v. 6b). Pagan prayers are destitute of thanksgiving (cf. Romans 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:2), whereas truly Christian prayer breathes thanksgiving because thankfulness is the posture of grace. Thus, at the root of our prayers must be thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Christ through the gospel. In fact, every activity is to be freighted with thanksgiving. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17). All our requests are to be made known to God and adorned with lavish praise to God for the innumerable hues and shapes of his grace.

Of course, whatever we make known to God is already known by him. So why are we to do this? Because as we bring our requests, which reflect every possible cause for anxiety, we are casting all our cares on God and are declaring our absolute dependence upon him. This was the way the apostle himself prayed for all the churches — with extravagant glad remembrances of God’s grace.

Peace! The accrued force of Paul’s imperatives produces a sublime result: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). The boon is incredible. It includes “the peace of God.” This is the peace that God himself possesses, “the serenity in which he lives,” so to speak.¹⁷ In this sense it is the same as the peace that Christ embodies and gives: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not

your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). This peace transcends all rationality, which is, to borrow a phrase from Ephesians, far more “than all that we ask or think” (3:20).

Moreover, God’s own peace that transcends thought and imagination “will guard [garrison] your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This is an apt metaphor because the Philippians daily saw the Roman garrison and their gleaming military hardware, just as we view today’s peacekeeping forces on televised world news.¹⁸ The “hearts and . . . minds” (the whole inner person) of those in union with Christ are garrisoned by the personal, ineffable peace of God. What a powerful peace! And note that this peace is given irrespective of whether the specific requests are granted or not. God’s peace will mightily flood over those who with thanksgiving make their requests known to God.¹⁹

What a marvelous progression Paul’s imperatives bring, and what grace they would mean for the Philippian church as they were implemented. How salutary it is to “Rejoice in the Lord always” — to reference the parchments of grace that recall what God did in saving us — the merry fires of salvation — and to learn to rejoice at all times even amidst the worst scenarios. Then, in concert with rejoicing always, we can let our gentleness be known to everyone — the very gentleness of Christ himself. And then more grace flows, enabling us to rejoice and to be gentle in the knowledge that God is near. Thus the command to not be anxious about anything will find fertile ground in our hearts, and we, with glad remembrances of God’s grace, will lay out our requests to God who already knows them and so find ourselves garrisoned by the peace of God that passes all understanding.

The commitment to obey the command to rejoice — to obey the command to be gentle to everyone — to obey the command to not worry about anything — to obey the command to pray with thanksgiving and thus receive the marvelous peace of God — these commitments will elevate the unity and life of the church and build an inviting haven for a world that needs Christ.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me — practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (4:8, 9)

20

Good Thoughts

PHILIPPIANS 4:8, 9

The capacity of the human brain is the subject of ever-widening scientific wonder. Its twelve to fourteen billion cells are only a shadow of its complexity, because each cell sends out thousands of connecting tendrils so that a single cell may be connected with 10,000 neighboring cells, each of which is constantly exchanging data impulses. These twelve to fourteen billion brain cells times 10,000 connectors make the human mind an unparalleled computer. The mind's activity has been compared to 1,000 switchboards, each big enough to serve New York City, all running at full speed as they receive and send questions and orders. Put another way, there is more electronic equivalent in one human brain than in all the radio and television stations of the entire world put together!

The human brain does not miss a thing. It is capable of giving and receiving the subtlest input — from imagining a universe in which time bends to creating the polyphonic texture of a Bach fugue or transmitting and receiving a message from God himself — feats no computer will ever accomplish.

The dizzying potential of the human mind reaches its apex in the possibility of possessing the mind of Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit — a possibility affirmed by Paul when he said, “But we have the mind of Christ” — a mind that is constantly renewed (1 Corinthians 2:16; cf. Romans 12:2). No computer will ever be able to think God's thoughts, nor will any device be able to know the heart of God or do his works. But the mystery that resides between our ears has this capacity. Indeed, it was created for this — to have the mind of Christ.

This God-like potential points us to a great scandal because very often we Christians fall far short of the mind of Christ. Far more often than we will admit, our thinking is not Christian. John Milton wrote, “A mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n. . . .”¹ And that is the experience of every Christian.

So it is imperative that we invite Christ to take over our minds. “Keep your heart with all vigilance,” says Proverbs, “for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23). When Jesus quoted Israel’s great Shema, he said, “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind* . . .” (Mark 12:30). “Mind” is Jesus’ addition to the ancient Shema. And as philosopher/theologian Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. comments, “Here is a change worth a gasp. What if a four-year-old prayed outright: ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my brain to keep’? You would notice.” But that is what our Lord wants and demands. He wants to keep our minds.

We emphasize this because it has direct bearing on Paul’s command about the Philippians’ thought lives in 4:8, 9. As we see from the immediately preceding context, in order to counter the discord between Euodia and Syntyche that was threatening the unity of the Philippian church, Paul gave four brief imperatives that, if obeyed would bring them the peace of God — namely: 1) rejoice, 2) be gentle, 3) do not be anxious, and 4) pray.

If these were implemented, Paul promised, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). Now Paul exhorted the Philippians to embrace exalted thought patterns and practices that would enhance God’s presence and peace, as he promised in verse 9: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me — practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

It is important to note that these six rhythmically arranged virtues are qualities that the Greco-Roman culture itself held high. “Paul now offers a cross-cultural Christian exhortation *in the language of Philippi*” (Bockmuehl).³ Paul took terms that were current in moral philosophy and pressed them into service for Christianity.⁴ This was moral language that the surrounding pagan culture could understand. Christian virtues are consonant with the general goodness recognized by non-Christian culture. However, at the same time, as Peter T. O’Brien points out, Paul’s “appeal is not to some pagan religious ideal, nor to an acceptance of Stoic presupposition lying behind the ideas, much less to some wholesale acceptance of the norms and values of the world.”⁵ Paul gives no endorsement of Greco-Roman morality. For example, there is no mention of the four classical virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and self-control. In fact, there is no close parallel to Paul’s list anywhere in contemporary literature.⁶

This understood, we see that Paul is calling Euodia and Syntyche and the entire Philippian church to a life that is not only Christian but a life with a broad moral appeal to their contemporary Greco-Roman culture, with the intention that “in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” the Philippians would “shine as lights in the world” (cf. 2:15). Then, as now, a winsome ethical testimony is a powerful evangelistic force in an unbelieving culture.

THOUGHTS THAT INVITE THE PEACE OF GOD (v. 8)

The six parallel clauses are high-sounding in the Greek and together evoke a stately impressiveness, which we can sense in the English if we read them slowly: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable . . .” (v. 8a.). We will briefly touch on each of these six elements and then consider what is required to make them our mental focus.

Six thought patterns. First, the Philippians must contemplate “whatever is true,” which here means truth in the broadest, most comprehensive sense. For followers of Christ, truth begins with his divine person as God the Son, the embodiment of truth. He is all truth, and his gospel is truth — “the word of the truth, the gospel” (Colossians 1:5). God’s word, he says, “is truth” (John 17:17). Everything that is true is from God because all truth is God’s truth.

Therefore, a mind that contemplates what is true not only sees Christ, the Word, and the gospel but also rationally engages his creation, rejects irrational thinking, and speaks the truth. This mind seeks “whatever is true” in every avenue of life, from faith to science to relationships to public life to business.

Second, Paul’s readers must focus on “whatever is honorable.” The Greek word here translated *honorable* is used variously in the Pastoral Epistles to teach what those who are older and in leadership must be like (cf. Titus 2:2 [ESV: “dignified”]; 1 Timothy 3:8, 11 [ESV: “dignified”]). So the word signifies a personal moral excellence that is dignified and worthy of honor.⁷ This is the meaning here in Philippians 4:8 — a noble life of spiritual gravitas that evokes honor. It is the opposite of ignoble. The Philippians are to focus on whatever is dignified and noble and honorable and to aspire to such character.

Third, they were to concentrate on “whatever is just.” For Paul, that which is “just” or “right” is defined by the character of God. But he also used “just” or “right” in the sense of right thought or action (cf. 1:7), and this broad sense was in view here. The Philippians were to contemplate the things that make for just living — doing the right thing.

Fourth, the readers were to focus on “whatever is pure.” This is not limited to sexual purity but extends to all areas of moral purity in thought and speech and actions. They were to focus on that which is not tainted with evil.⁸

Fifth, the Philippians were to contemplate “whatever is lovely.” By “lovely” Paul means those things that put themselves forward by their attractiveness.⁹ “Lovely” includes not only what is morally lovely but what is aesthetically lovely — “all that is beautiful in creation and in human lives”¹⁰ — from a sunset to a symphony to caring for the poor and powerless — all things beautiful.¹¹

Sixth, Paul's readers were to consider "whatever is commendable," which refers to the kind of conduct that is spoken of highly by other people.¹²

Summary and command. These six qualities together form a stunning rhythmic portrait of the mental focus and aspirations that Paul desired for his readers — "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable" — a truly stunning portrait of how we must think, which Paul then framed with a comprehensive summary and command: "if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (v. 8b). Nothing of moral excellence and nothing that would earn the praise of God or man must be left out of the Philippians' contemplation. And the command is ongoing: "Think [continually] on these things" — let your mind continually dwell on these things. Ponder them without ceasing.

No doubt Euodia and Syntyche, while immersed in their conflict, had not been thinking elevated thoughts. However, as they likely took Paul's injunction to heart and began to think thoughts that were "true" and "honorable" and "just" and "pure" and "lovely" and "commendable," they were infused with positive aspirations that facilitated their reconciliation. Furthermore, as the beleaguered church embedded in Philippi (that little bastion of Greco-Roman culture) began to think upon and live out these appealing virtues, the light of the gospel further penetrated the pagan culture. And twenty centuries later we who make the decision to continually think only of such things will become more effective agents of grace.

As we apply these truths to ourselves, we must understand that this text has always been relentlessly demanding. The sheer weight of Paul's six positives demands the rejection of negative input. Listen to their inversion: "Finally brothers, whatever is untrue, whatever is dishonorable, whatever is unjust, whatever is impure, whatever is unlovely, whatever is uncommendable, if there is anything not morally excellent, if there is anything unworthy of praise, *do not* think about these things." Paul's command calls for a life of conscious negation. Thinking as we ought to demands the discipline of refusal.

Over the years I have preached and written on this extensively, most recently in two chapters of *Set Apart to Save*, one on "Viewing Sensuality" and the other on "Violence and Voyeurism."¹³ Suffice it to say that contemporary media overwhelmingly presents the antithesis of Philippians 4:8 as they have become increasingly eroticized, violent, and intolerant of Jesus Christ. And given that there is virtually no distinction between the viewing habits of Christians and non-Christians, the minds of countless Christians have become increasingly eroticized and blasphemous — which is to say, sub-Christian. Today more than ever before we need to heed the psalmist's advice: "I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; I will not set

before my eyes anything that is worthless” (Psalm 101:2b, 3a). Perhaps there needs to be the violent refusal voiced by Jesus: “‘If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell’” (Matthew 5:29).

Along with the discipline of refusal, there is the ancient God-given remedy of spending much time reading and meditating on the Scriptures. The greatest danger in our busy, increasingly post-literate world is that we make little or no effort to think God’s thoughts after him, to hide his word in our hearts so that we might not sin against him (cf. Psalm 119:11). We cannot be profoundly influenced by that which we do not know.

We must hide God’s Word in our hearts. We must make time for quiet meditation in the early morning or in a private space at noon or in a corner of the house at night. We must read and reread passages, listening to the Spirit, turning the thoughts over in our minds, praying over a word or a phrase. We must acquaint ourselves with all of God’s Word by reading and listening to it. Remember, five pages a day will take you through the whole Bible in only a year! It takes this kind of commitment to learning what God says to counter the noisy input that daily assaults our minds “and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Here again Paul’s charge to think about whatever is “true” and “honorable” and “just” and “pure” and “lovely” and “commendable” is powerfully phrased because “think about these things” uses the word *logizomai*, from which we get the mathematical word *logarithm*. Paul commands the same deliberate, prolonged contemplation of these virtues that it takes to weigh a mathematical problem.¹⁴

ACTION THAT WILL BRING THE PEACE OF GOD (v. 9)

Paul was no armchair coach. He lived out each of the six “whatever” qualities that he was calling his readers to think about so long and so hard. Paul had the mind of Christ. He contemplated whatever was true and then lived it; he thought and lived honorably; he thought and lived justly; he thought and lived purely; he thought of the lovely and lived in accord with it; he thought and lived commendably.

Living example. Thus he presented his own life as a living example to imitate: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me — practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9). The six virtues could have been used as exalted abstractions — materials for deep esoteric contemplation — but he clothed his call to think about them in the flesh and blood of his own life as he lived it. “What you have learned and received” refers to what he taught his readers through *personal instruction* beginning on the first day of their church’s existence. They had received the apostolic faith from Paul.

Along with this, Paul had given them his *personal example*, which they had “heard and seen” in him. Both when Paul was with them and when away, the Philippians heard about Paul’s character and conduct — his bravery, how he faced trials, his devotion, his prayer, his patient suffering, his resiliency. And when he was with them, they saw his godly example and his modeling of the “whatevers” he was asking of them. They had before their very eyes the pattern of an excellent and worthy life.

Summary call. So Paul commanded and promised them unashamedly, “practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9b). In essence he said, “Imitate me, and practice truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, and rightness, and the God of peace will be with you.” The truth is, we have not learned “these things” until we have lived them out. “Noble thoughts are of little value unless they be translated into deeds. Living surpasses learning; practice outshines priority; living supersedes learning” (Strauss).¹⁵

The “whatevers” become reality on the basis of the choices we make on the subway, at our work desks, at the gas pump, driving in a carpool, and a thousand other anonymous occasions when we make the choices that shape our lives.¹⁶ Paul called his readers to write these virtues into their own lives by putting them into practice so that in time words like truth and justice and purity would be written large over their (and our) lives.

And the result is that “the God of peace will be with you.” In verse 7 Paul promised them “the peace of God” — God’s own personal peace — His own serenity. Here the reward is “the God of peace” *himself*.

In verse 7 it is God’s salvation that garrisons our hearts; here it is his presence that blesses and saves.¹⁷ God’s peace and his presence cannot be separated. They are one as his gift. And when his peace, his *shalom*, firmly reigns in the embedded church — whether in Philippi or Rome or New York or Bombay — it will radiate the light of Christ to the surrounding world.

This matter of our minds, the immensely complex mystery that resides between our temples, is a matter of life and death. On the one hand, there must be a conscious rejection of all that is not consonant with the mind of Christ, and on the other there must also be a conscious taking on of exalted thoughts — and not only the thinking of them but the practice of them day after day so that the mind of Christ shines out to a dark world.

*May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and pow’r controlling,
All I do and say.*

KATE B. WILKINSON, 1925

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (4:10-13)

21

Content in Christ

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

When Zacchaeus, the miserly little kingpin of the Jericho tax franchise, strode off to his home for a lengthy conversation with Jesus, no one anticipated the change that would be announced from his own lips for all to hear: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Luke 19:8). For starters, he gave away 50 percent of everything he had to the poor. And from the remaining half of his fortune, he pledged to make restitution at four times the amount of what he had extorted. In effect, Zacchaeus lived out Jesus’ command that had earlier caused the rich young ruler to depart from Jesus: “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

Tiny Zacchaeus had become huge! The compulsive drive to make money and keep it was gone. He went to Jesus mastered by the passion to get; he left mastered by the passion to give. He went in as the littlest man in Jericho; he left as the biggest man in town. Something wonderful had happened inside that house with Jesus. And Jesus made it forever clear for all to hear: “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham” (19:9). Zacchaeus had been regenerated — saved! And the immediate evidence of his new heart was his desire to give. His newfound generosity was *prima facie* evidence of his salvation.

The Apostle Paul would have known the story well because the teller of this story was Dr. Luke, his apostolic sidekick who later also wrote the book of Acts. So the equation of generosity and salvation was fixed firmly in Paul’s mind when he held up the example of the generosity of the Macedonian churches (of which Philippi was the leading congregation) to motivate the Corinthians to give:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints — and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

Using the example of the Philippians, Paul made a penetrating application to the Corinthians: “But as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine” (vv. 7, 8; cf. v. 24). So from this we know that Paul had long viewed the Philippian church as the real thing. He was so proud of them and loved them so much!

PAUL’S JOY (v. 10)

Spontaneous joy. This background helps us understand Paul’s burst of joy when Epaphroditus, very much worse for the wear, showed up at Paul’s Roman prison cell with a love offering from the Philippians: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me” (v. 10a). The apostle rejoiced in the generosity of the Philippians’ monetary gift because prisoners in the Roman system were dependent upon outside support for everything. But Paul’s joy went far deeper because the gift was indicative of the distant Philippians’ continuing authenticity and spiritual health. Their generosity revealed the same Macedonian health that sprang first from their having given themselves to the Lord.

Paul’s choice of words framed his response with bright color. The Greek word translated “revived” is a rare word that means “blossom again” like perennials in the spring. When gift-bearing Epaphroditus appeared in his cell, it was for the apostle like spring flowers suddenly bursting into bloom.

There was no muting of Paul’s joy. He rejoiced immensely. And it was “in the Lord.” Everyone in earshot knew all about it. Think of the apostle locked up, existing on the most meager provisions, listening to reports about others preaching Christ and intending to afflict him, longing to hear about his churches. And suddenly there was Epaphroditus and thus springtide and great joy.

Sensitive qualification. The apostle, always a sensitive people person, astutely sensed that his enthusiastic expression of thanks could be misunderstood by some of the Philippians as pointing to their prior lack of care, as if he were saying, “*Finally* you have revived your care for me.” So he

immediately added, “You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity” (v. 10b.). Paul knew that he was always on their minds, but that there were mitigating reasons for their lapse. Perhaps it was his changing venues, the distance, or recent poverty in Philippi. Whatever, he knew that they really did care.

PAUL’S CONTENTMENT (vv. 11, 12)

Still aware that he could be misunderstood to be saying that his joy came from the Philippians’ generous gift and the resulting prospect of a good meal and some warm clothing, Paul stated, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (v. 11). Paul’s declaration of contentment was meant to grip the Philippians’ attention because the word he used came straight from pagan Stoic philosophy. As Gordon Fee remarks, “On the surface his explanation looks like a meteor fallen from the Stoic sky into his epistle.”¹

The Stoics regarded contentment, *autarkeia*, as the essence of all virtues. For them contentment described the mind-set of the person who had become independent of all things and all people. The Stoic line was, “man should be sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his will, to resist the force of circumstances.”² The Stoic Seneca put it this way: “the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances.”³ The Stoic ideal was a kind of self-contained superman who could rise above it all in independent self-sufficiency and serenity.⁴

Christ-centered contentment. But Paul transformed the term with a “powerfully Christ-centered redefinition of contentment [*autarkeia*].”⁵ Paul and all who are in Christ are God-sufficient as opposed to self-sufficient. Contentment is rooted in the eternal God rather than in the temporal self. Thus while Paul and Seneca may appear to be close, they are a universe apart! Paul is sufficient and content not because he is independent but because he is totally dependent — upon Christ.⁶

The truth is, over the passage of time and through his epic experiences the Apostle Paul had come to know contentment in every situation. Given the unparalleled miseries and joys he experienced, this affirmation of continual contentment is an astonishing statement — a statement that no honest Stoic could ever make! And as we will see, this contentment is available to any man or woman in Christ.

Dynamic contentment. In the remainder of the text Paul expounded the dynamics of his contentment in beautifully balanced, rhythmic phrases. Paul said expansively, “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound” (v. 12a). To be “brought low” or “humbled” has implicit reference to Christ in the famous statement of 2:8, where we read that Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.” Paul knew how

to be humbled and even requested that he share in Christ's humiliation: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (3:10). No Stoic would ever endure such humbling (much less invite it) because humiliation was considered by them to be despicable. Suffering, yes, but it was to be done stoically. But humiliation? Never! Humiliation regularly headed the Stoic's list of things to be avoided.⁷

Paul's balanced sentence, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound" means that Paul knew how to share in Christ's humiliation *and* how to share in his glorious riches (cf. 4:19).⁸ In this life Paul had been repeatedly beaten to within an inch of his life, but he had also been caught up to the third heaven (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:24, 25; 12:1-6). Paul also came to gladly boast, as he says, "of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities" (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10).

Extreme contentment. Having stated the larger principle, Paul elaborated on the extremes of his contentment: "In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (v. 12b.). On the downside "hunger" and "need" echo the extremes of the hardship lists from Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

- "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. . . . We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things." (1 Corinthians 4:11-13)

- "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

- ". . . but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger. . . ." (2 Corinthians 6:4, 5)

- "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." (2 Corinthians 11:24-27)

Paul had learned to experience contentment in the extremes of deprivation from hunger to homelessness to being in rags to beatings to labor and exhaustion to intense humiliation.

On the upside “plenty” and “abundance” echo the apostle’s experience of those times that were the good times by comparison. While we know much about his deprivations from the hardship lists, we know little about his experiences of abundance, but we can imagine what they were. For example, in Philippi when the church was born, likely there were feasts in the home of his first convert, Lydia, a prosperous seller of purple, and perhaps also in the home of his other notable convert, the Philippian jailer. Certainly there were times in Ephesus and Corinth when the sun shined brightly over the pleasures of friends and feasting amidst the beauty of God’s creation and especially the beauty of his people as they honored Paul for bringing them the gospel. And during these times Paul was content.

What is remarkable, of course, is that Paul knew the secret of being content in either extreme — whether hunger or a sumptuous Mediterranean repast. Indeed, it may be more of an accomplishment to be content with plenty. As John Calvin explained:

He who knows how to use present abundance soberly and temperately with thanksgiving, prepared to part with everything whenever it may please the Lord, giving also a share to his brother according to his ability, and is also not puffed up, that man has learned to excel and to abound. This is an excellent and rare virtue, and much greater than the endurance of poverty.⁹

Here Paul’s terminology — “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger” — is borrowed from the vocabulary of false religions, where “secret” originally referred to induction into a mystery cult. Though the word *secret* was no longer limited to that usage, the sense of initiation still lingered. So Paul’s point is that Christian contentment remains a mystery to those on the outside and can only be learned from the inside by those who are in Christ. In truth, “Contentment is a . . . quiet secret known and cherished only by a few” (Bockmuehl).¹⁰ Paul had come to know the secret of contentment over a period of time. His learning was part of his spiritual growth and sanctification. The question for us is, have we learned the secret?

We can, as we will now observe in the apex of Paul’s thought in this section.

PAUL’S CONFIDENCE (v. 13)

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me” is one of the most frequently quoted verses of the Bible. It has been taped on the ceiling over bench presses in weight rooms. Cryptic Philippians 4:13s are affixed on the

edges of bathroom mirrors to supply inspiration to face the challenges of the day. This text has been the subject of countless needlepoints and calligraphies.

But, sadly, Philippians 4:13 has been widely misused as it has been removed from its context and employed as an inspirational snippet to say, “I can do *anything* through Christ who strengthens me” or “I can do *everything* (especially extraordinary things) through Christ who strengthens me.” It has been especially abused by those who view their Christianity through the lens of triumphalism, who think that through Christ they become superhuman.

As with every other line of Scripture, the assertion “I can do all things” is controlled by the context. Thus what Paul says is that in whatever circumstances I find myself, in whatever extremes — whether experiencing abundance with the wealthy or fellowshiping with the poor or struggling to proclaim the gospel to people who don’t want to hear or enduring the wrath of the establishment or bringing peace to the church or languishing in prison — I can be *content* and “can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Paul is confident that he will be divinely strengthened to do anything and everything that *God calls* him to do. Not only could Paul be content and confident in every circumstance, he could also be sure that he would be equipped with divine power to deal with it. Paul says much the same thing in Colossians 1:28, 29 where he reveals that it is Christ who sustains his active ministry: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, *struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me*” (italics added). Paul toils and struggles, straining with all his might, but it is the energy and power of Christ that strengthens him!

Here the precise sense of the Greek of Philippians 4:13 will help us because the preposition “through” should be rendered “in,” so that the promise reads, “I can do all things *in* him who strengthens me.”¹¹ Whatever comes Paul’s way, he has the strength to meet it. If he is brought low, he is a man *in* Christ; if he abounds, he is a man *in* Christ. In any and every circumstance he is a man *in* Christ. As a man *in* Christ he can do all things. As a man *in* Christ he is content regardless of the situation.

Fellow believers, you and I are not one whit behind the Apostle Paul in advantage because we, like Paul, are all *in* Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). “In Christ” is the most used description of the believer in Paul’s letters. This means that you can be confident that you will be divinely strengthened to do whatever God calls you to do.

Of course, this does not mean that you can do everything you want to do.

Do you want to fly? Go to flight school. But please do not take the controls of an airplane reciting Philippians 4:13. Are you a non-golfer who wants to shoot 70? Understand that muttering, “I can do all things through him” before you tee off will turn your fellow golfers into atheists! However, if you are following Christ’s call and serving him faithfully in the task to which he has called you, Paul’s confident words are yours: “I can do all things *in* him who strengthens me.”

Wide swings of fortune await us all. At times many of us will experience bounding prosperity. And all of us will know devastating hardships. But because Christ is the center of our life, we can be content.

Both abundance and loss will pass, but Christ remains the same.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. (4:14-20)

22

Assurances for the Generous

PHILIPPIANS 4:14-20

Writing toward the end of his life, famed *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell penned this fond remembrance of his aunt:

When I was a little boy of six I met her on a cinder path at the Chautauqua grounds one day and she opened her purse and took out a dime and gave it to me. “I don’t think my father would want me to take it,” I said. My father knew a spendthrift when he saw one, and, hoping to teach me the value of money, he had put me on an allowance of ten cents a week, with the understanding that when the ten cents was gone I was not to ask for more. Also, if possible, I was to save part of the ten cents. “It’s perfectly all right,” Aunt Beth said. “Don’t worry. I’ll explain it to him.” I took off for the place where they sold Cracker Jacks. And she stands forever, on the cinder path at the Chautauqua grounds, smiling at the happiness she has just set free.¹

Generosity is singularly beautiful and, when remembered, will prompt a genial smile. This is what the latest example of the storied generosity of the Philippian church prompted in the imprisoned Paul in faraway Rome, as we saw in the last study: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me” (4:10). And the apostle’s smile still lingered as he said, “Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble” (v. 14). In fact, the apostolic smile shines ever-brighter in this paragraph as he assured the Philippians regarding their generosity and the value of their gift and then of God’s generous supply to them.

This section overflows with assurance to the generous church, both then and now.

ASSURANCE REGARDING THEIR GENEROSITY

(vv. 14-16)

Laudable partnership. To begin with, Paul viewed the Philippians' generosity as evidence of their partnership or fellowship with him in ministry. Recall that Paul began this letter to the Philippian church celebrating their partnership: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:3-5). The word he used for "partnership" is the word *koinonia*, from the *koinon* word group, and means "fellowship" or "partnership" or "active participation." And then he drew from the same word group two verses later in 1:7 where he said, "You are all partakers with me of grace."

Now, notably, here at the end of the letter he dipped into the *koinon* word group again as he declared, "Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble" (v. 14, italics added) or more exactly, "Yet you did good to become partners in my affliction." Note also that in the following sentence Paul said, "no church entered into partnership [or fellowship] with me in giving and receiving, except you only" (v. 15). Therefore, Paul wanted his readers to understand that giving to support his ministry was taking up fellowship with him as a partner in his present tribulations. Though the Philippians were not in prison with Paul, they participated in his afflictions by their sympathy and monetary sacrifice. And as they thus participated in his afflictions, they were doing so amidst the context of their own sufferings in Philippi (cf. 1:29, 30).

So we see that giving to the mission and ministry of others is established as a Biblical indicator of spiritual health. Why? First, as we saw in the case of Zacchaeus, generosity is a sign of a regenerate heart (cf. Luke 19:8, 9). Second, giving to mission and ministry is substantive evidence of participation in the fellowship of the gospel. In fact, if we're not giving to the gospel ministry, we have no part in it, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). What we do with our resources is a window into our souls. The question is, what does God see when he looks in?

The Philippians had nothing to fear, for the opening line of verse 14 has Paul commending them (in excellent Greek but ungrammatical English) — "You did good." Their partnering with Paul had apostolic and therefore divine approval.

Stellar generosity. But there is more, because their gospel partnership was marked by extraordinary generosity: "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered

into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again” (vv. 15, 16).

At first glance Paul’s declaration that the Philippians were the only church that had fellowship with Paul “in giving and receiving” sounds like the cold language of commerce. And indeed the words are technical accounting terms. However, in the context of Greco-Roman culture they are freighted with friendship — and here a warm and lasting friendship that “recalls the mutual exchange of services and affliction which they had shared in the past”³ through their “partnership in the gospel from the first day” on (1:5). Thus “giving and receiving” are idioms of deepest affection and friendship.

When Paul left Philippi and traveled ninety-five miles down the Egnatian Way to Thessalonica, the poverty-stricken Philippians repeatedly sent representatives to Thessalonica with gifts to meet his needs. And when Paul left Macedonia, they remained the only church to support him. Even when Paul went to wealthy Corinth (from whose proud people Paul would accept no money), it was the Philippians of Macedonia who helped him, as Paul explained to the Corinthians: “And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need” (2 Corinthians 11:9). The Philippians’ generosity was stellar! Most certainly they gave from the heart.

But Holy Scripture always has a greater audience in view. And to us the message is unmistakable. First, we are to be a generous people. Further, we are all called to give to enable others to take the gospel to the lost. The example of the Philippians must always challenge us.

For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints — and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.
(2 Corinthians 8:3-5)

At the same time, excellent missions stewardship has a downside. If we are part of a missions-focused church, we may imagine we’re just fine. But the call to give to reach the world has not gripped our souls unless we ourselves are giving sacrificially to this end. However, if we are generous in our support of evangelism and mission, then there is a boon — becoming full-fledged members of the fellowship of the gospel, those from the apostles on down through the centuries to today who love Christ and the gospel. Lastly, and most importantly, it means that we will sense the same smile of God that rested upon the generous little church in Philippi.

ASSURANCE OF THEIR GIFTS' SURPASSING VALUE (vv. 17, 18)

Parenthetical disclaimer. Paul's kind assurances could have been taken by certain of his hearers in Philippi as an ever-so-subtle manipulation to get them to give more, so he inserted a disclaimer: "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit" (v. 17). Again his words were redolent with the language of commerce, but as before they are intensely spiritual in application. The present participle "increases" signifies *continuing* multiplication that creates compound spiritual interest credited to their account.⁴

When people give to a political campaign in the hope that if their candidate is elected they will be remembered, their generosity is questionable. Or when some give to a public service with the proviso that their name be mentioned (for example, in public television — "This program is made possible by a grant from the Kent and Barbara Hughes Foundation"), the motivation may be to advertise themselves as rich people of cultural substance. But most certainly none of the Philippians were seeking to build either their reputation or their heavenly bank accounts by showy displays of generosity.

Nevertheless, Paul's encouragement to generosity was given with an eye to compounding spiritual interest for the Philippians until the return of Christ. And Paul had support for this from Jesus, who told the rich young ruler, "Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). Jesus, in fact, composed a proverb to help his followers remember this: "'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven'" (Matthew 6:19, 20).

The truth is, the only money that we will see again is that which we give away. And that money will return with compounded interest!

Immense value. Having inserted his disclaimer, Paul concluded his use of accounting metaphors, saying, "I have received full payment, and more" (v. 18a), or more exactly, "I have received full payment and am full to overflowing." With this he switched to the exalted Biblical language of sacrifice: "I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (v. 18b). The picture suggested by a "fragrant offering" is that of the Old Testament's burnt offering in which the offering was consumed, so that a sumptuous roast-like aroma rose up to God as an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice.⁵ Of course, God doesn't really smell the aroma of a burnt offering, and he isn't impressed by the people going through the motions of the sacrifice. What really pleases God is the generous spirit of his people.⁶

Everything here is descriptive of believers' proper response to God, memorialized in the magnificent words of Romans 12:1 (which uses the same Greek terms for "sacrifice" and "acceptable"): "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Here in verse 18 "acceptable and pleasing" emphasizes that the Philippians' generosity to Paul was of the highest value to God himself.

This is so clarifying about what is important in life. God's Word lifts the fog.

*My barn burned down
Last night — now I can
See the moon.⁷*

ASSURANCE OF SUPPLY (v. 19)

At last we are at the high point of the text and the conclusion to verses 10-18: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19).

Every need. The first half of this grand promise is closely linked with and echoes the preceding context. Just as the Philippians had kept Paul "well supplied" (v. 18), so now God will most certainly "supply every need" of theirs. Thus we see that this promise of supply is for generous people like the Philippians and cannot be claimed by those who live for themselves.

Paul promised the generous, "And my God will supply every need of yours." This was intensely personal for Paul. His God, who had repeatedly displayed his power in every conceivable circumstance, would supply the Philippians' needs — just as he had done for Paul through them! Moreover, Paul promised that God would meet not their greed but their need; not all they thought they needed, but all they truly needed. "Every need" compasses the breath-taking range of everything that is vital to living for Christ.

Looking to the immediate context, this meant for the Philippians that God would meet any material need created by their great generosity to Paul. Furthermore, in regard to the spiritual concerns laid out in this letter, God would supply the need for joy and for steadfastness and for endurance and for humility and for concord and for peace and for the ability to face all circumstances. The stunning scope of the promise is that there is not one thing that they (and all faithful Christians) truly needed that God would not give.

On the basis of this we can proclaim to every generous believer that God will meet every need he or she has. But to the grudging, there is no such solace. The wholesale application of this great promise does not exist. It is for the generous follower of Christ alone.

His riches. How does God do this? The answer is equally expansive —

“according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19b). As Gordon Fee explains, “The Philippians’ generosity toward Paul, expressed lavishly at the beginning of verse 18, is exceeded beyond all imagination by the lavish ‘wealth’ of the eternal God, who dwells ‘in glory’ full of ‘riches’ made available ‘in Christ Jesus.’”⁸ God’s “riches” are inherent in his being as the Creator and the God of the universe. So his riches include and infinitely exceed the aggregate wealth of the universe. God’s incalculable wealth together with the ineffable splendor of his glory form the treasury and the dazzling context from which he lavishes his children “according to his riches.”⁹

If I had a million dollars and gave you a hundred dollars I would be giving *out* of my riches. However, if I gave you a blank check I would be giving *according* to my riches. But God does far more because his riches are infinite and cannot be diminished by the endless zeroes of a celestial blank check. The fact that his riches are “in glory” sets up the ultimate locus “in Christ Jesus,” which describes in whom and how the riches that come from God’s glory are given to His people.¹⁰ Paul began this letter by addressing it “To the saints in Christ Jesus” (1:1) and concluded “in Christ Jesus.” For Christians, every need is met in Christ. He is our beginning and our end. All things come to us in him and through him.

What assurance this brings to those who are in Christ, who share in the fellowship of the gospel through their care and generosity — “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19).

Having reached this height of exaltation, Paul could do nothing but burst into doxology: “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen” (v. 20). Whereas only a line earlier the apostle used the intensely personal “my God” to assure his readers of God’s care, he now used the plural “our God” as he united himself with the Philippians in ascribing glory to God forever and ever, in all ages to come.

Remember that all of this came because of the Philippian church’s generosity to the Apostle Paul. Praise to God is the proper response when God’s people are generous.

*We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate’er the gift may be:
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.*¹¹

WILLIAM W. HOW, 1858

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (4:21-23)

23

A Fond Farewell

PHILIPPIANS 4:21-23

The concept of fellowship in the book of Philippians is, to say the least, robust, as the five occurrences of the fellowship (*koinon*) word group so forcefully demonstrate.¹ The first instance in 1:5, where Paul celebrated the Philippians' "partnership [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day until now," introduces the vigorous fellowship that rose from their mutual commitment to the gospel. The spiritual glue of their fellowship was, of course, the three-way bond between Paul and the Philippians and Christ, which came from their union with Christ. This provided them with cohesion and focus that transcended mere human fellowship. Together they were a community of brothers and sisters in Christ bound together by a great quest that was nothing less than the evangelization of the Gentile world — a quest they had pursued from the very first day.

The second occurrence of the fellowship word group comes almost immediately in 1:7 where Paul told the Philippians, "for you are all partakers [fellowshippers] with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." This was an eye-opening moment in Paul's writings because the "grace" here, in which they shared fellowship, was not just believing (saving) grace. Rather Paul considered suffering and sacrifice and struggle for the gospel all to be grace. This can be seen in 1:29, where the verbal form of *charis* or "grace," was used by Paul to say, "For it has been granted [graced] to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." Suffering for the gospel was a grace in Paul's thinking and theology. So when the Philippians fellowshiped in Paul's sufferings, they partook of grace.

The third reference to the fellowship word group is in 2:1, where Paul appealed to the Philippians' experience of fellowship in the Holy Spirit:

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation [fellowship] in the Spirit . . .” This “fellowship in the Spirit” came about when, as Paul explained to the Corinthians, “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is affirmed by the lingering, final word of the Trinitarian benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). This is not a pious wish. Rather it is the enduring reality of our existence — “fellowship in the Spirit.” It is from within this fellowship that we all cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

The fourth appearance of fellowship comes in 3:10: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (KJV). Paul’s longing for such fellowship not only represented his heart’s ambition but was presented as the model for every believing heart.

The fifth and final occurrence of fellowship occurs in the epilogue of Philippians: “Yet it was kind of you to share [fellowship in] my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership [fellowship] with me in giving and receiving, except you only” (4:14, 15). Fellowship involves the generous sharing of our material substance for the proclamation of the gospel.

What are we to conclude from the fivefold usages of fellowship-related words in Philippians? For starters, while the Apostle Paul no doubt had at times fellowshiped over a tasty dessert with the Philippians, fellowship for him (apostolic fellowship) was *not* a cup of Starbucks and biscotti! Fellowship involved 1) participation in the great task of getting the gospel out; 2) the grace of participation in others’ suffering for the sake of the gospel; 3) participation in the Holy Spirit, through whom we are all baptized into one body; 4) the longing to participate in the sufferings of Christ; and 5) participation in the spread of the gospel through the generous giving of material resources.

Thus we conclude that these five elements must all be included under Paul’s opening phrase “fellowship in the gospel.” This fellowship was united in an epic quest that involved sharing in the gospel — in each other’s sufferings — in the Spirit — in Christ’s sufferings — and sharing from that which they had. The quest here exceeds any novelist’s imagination in drama and reality.

I emphasize this because the Philippians’ multifaceted participation in the gospel provides the theological and interpersonal background for understanding Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Though separated by 800 miles of

the Egnatian Way, both Paul and the Philippians had been graced with suffering. The Philippians were poor, despised, and disenfranchised by the provincial Roman government of Philippi, and in Rome Paul was a prisoner of the same system, despised and betrayed. Whenever Paul thought of the Philippians, he lovingly longed for them. He had heard rumblings of division in Philippi amidst their stress. Then unexpectedly Epaphroditus was standing before him with a generous gift from them. And soon Paul was penning a letter to his partners in the fellowship of the gospel, instructing them as to how they were to strive together in unity for the gospel (cf. 1:27; 2:1-4; 4:1).

As we wrap up our studies in Philippians, we will keep this theme in mind while we briefly visit some of the texts that particularly grace our hearts, those that particularly illumine the fellowship of the gospel.

THE PROLOGUE (1:3-11)

Scholars are quick to point out that the prologue contains the germ of most of the thoughts that Paul developed throughout his letter. But what gripped me most is his outpouring of affection for the Philippians, who joined with him in the fellowship of the gospel:

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (vv. 7, 8)

Notice that Paul bookended his appreciation for their being “partakers” (fellowshippers) with him in the grace of suffering with two poignant expressions of affection. First he said, “I hold you in my heart.” We can well imagine that while affirming this, the apostle’s mind ranged back to the beginning, to Lydia, the mother of the church, the extraordinary seller of purple, and then on through a kaleidoscope of faces, all of whom were lodged in his heart. But unlike so many of us, this was no glib pleasantry because he actually held them at the very center of his being, the center of his consciousness and emotions and will. The geography of their faces and even their souls were embedded at the epicenter of his life.

The other bookend was so profound that he called God as witness to the depth of his affection: “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (v. 8). Such an oath was rare for Paul, but he wanted to drive the truth of his longing and affection for them deep into their understanding. In truth Paul was “so advanced in union with Christ that it is as if Christ were expressing his love through Paul.” Indeed,

as Alec Motyer explained, “the emotional constitution of Christ himself has taken over possession of his servant.”²

While I would never claim the depth of Paul’s affection, as I look back over forty years of ministry, a collage of names and faces rises pleasantly from the fellowship of the gospel — some near and some very distant. My expectation and prayer for all of us is that the bonds of our affection will become such that we will hold each other in our hearts, remembering with fond affection our fellowship together of grace in gospel ministry and longing for all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

PAUL’S CONFIDENCE IN PRISON (1:12-26)

Over verses 12-26, in chapter 1, we can write the summary statement, “Paul’s joyous confidence in prison.”

Confidence in the gospel. Sometimes I have mused, after reading verses 12-18, that when it came time for a change of guard and Paul’s manacle was switched to another Roman soldier, he probably murmured a silent prayer — *Thank you, God, for another soul with whom to share Christ.* And then throughout the hours of his guard duty, the soldier watched and listened to a man who was utterly intoxicated with Christ and the gospel. Thus Paul could write, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (vv. 12, 13). All the elite soldiers of Rome knew that Paul was in prison for Christ! Paul was so utterly confident in his difficult situation that most of the brothers became confident to speak the Word without fear (cf. v. 14). And when rival evangelists preached spitefully to cause him pain, he rejoiced that Christ was proclaimed whether in pretense or in truth (cf. vv. 15-18). Imagine how this played in the beleaguered little fellowship of the gospel back in Philippi! “Can you believe him? What a man! He’s still the same. The gospel is going out in Rome. And you know what? The same can happen here in this little Roman *polis*!”

Two men looked through the bars.

One saw the mud, the other, the stars.³

What do we see?

Confidence in salvation. The following paragraph (vv. 19-26) contains Paul’s declaration of his joyous confidence in salvation. And at the spiritual center of the paragraph is embedded the triumphant aphorism — a proverb and ideal for every believing soul — “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21). When the Philippians heard this read, the effect must have been stunning because of the parallelism, tonal assonance, and compact-

ness as a verbless Greek sentence: “For to me to live Christ, and to die gain.”

Paul could say, “For to me to live Christ” because at the deepest level he was in Christ and Christ was in him. As another of Paul’s verbless expressions explosively has it, “If anyone in Christ — new creation!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). But the overarching point here that Paul made with his declaration “For to me to live is Christ” was that he had willingly taken up the sufferings of Christ, joyously embracing the burdens of the cross. Thus “For to me to live is Christ” was not a pious declaration of spiritual achievement but a confident declaration of life commitment.

Beautifully, Paul’s confidence in this life even extended into death — “and to die is gain.” Death for Paul would bring an expansion of his life, which was Christ himself. He would be like Christ. He would repose in perfect righteousness. The pleasures of Christ would be everywhere. What an aphorism for the beleaguered fellowship of the gospel in Philippi: “For to me to live Christ, and to die gain.”

As long as I live, I will never forget former church elder Andrew Chong taking a pen in hand shortly before his death and with intense deliberation writing these twelve words in a single column for his children: *For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain* — to which he added *Hallelujah*. He then said softly, “Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed.” Andrew’s *Hallelujah* was the deliberate signature of his soul’s confidence and submission to the will of God. Now, from the grave, Andrew’s appropriation of Paul’s aphorism calls us to do the same.

PAUL’S CALL FOR UNITY IN THE GOSPEL (1:27-30)

It is commonly understood that the section that begins in the middle of chapter 1 at verse 27 and continues to the end of chapter 2 is a cohesive unit and that verse 27 best articulates the theme of Paul’s letter: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”

This sentence is notable for two reasons. First, it is the first of nineteen commands in this short letter. Remarkably, Paul’s brilliant and passionate writing featured no imperative until now, so we should take note. Secondly, the language of the command is uniquely rich and evocative because the verb shares its root with the cognate noun *polis* or “city,” as does a noun in 3:20 that means “citizenship.” So the command should read, “Only let your manner of life as citizens [implicitly of Heaven] be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Paul in effect called the fellowship of the gospel to live out a counter-citizenship whose capital and seat of power was not earthly but heavenly.

And the evidence of this counter-citizenship would be that they would work together in unity — “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27b). The enemies to unity that Paul had in mind were both external and internal. Paul briefly gave advice for standing against the external foes of unity in 1:28-30 and then addressed the greater problem of divisions from within in the opening sentences of chapter 2.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (2:1-4)

This call to humbly put others first brings us to one of the high points of the New Testament as Paul held up Christ, the ultimate citizen of Heaven, as one who did not seek his own interests but those of others.

CHRIST’S HUMILIATION AND EXALTATION (2:5-11)

One commentator, Markus Bockmuehl, has likened this section to “the soaring, unanswerable language of a Bach cantata which is best understood by being heard out to the end — and then heard again.” And certainly it does function this way because when read and reread it takes us down in Christ’s humiliation and then up in soaring exaltation.

His humiliation. Here Paul commanded the Philippians to have the mind of Christ and then immediately articulated the three downward movements of Christ’s self-humiliation. The downward movement began in Heaven where Christ “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (v. 6). Next his self-humiliation moved further downward in the Incarnation as he “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (v. 7). And finally Christ’s self-humiliation reached the lowest point possible when he became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (v. 8). Nothing could be lower! This was the crowning ignominy.

And it was all his own doing. No one humbled him. Herod did not humble him. Neither did Pilate or Caiaphas. The mighty Romans did not humble him. There was no power in Heaven or on earth or in the abyss that could do it.

His exaltation. But the downward trajectory of Christ’s humiliation was followed by his soaring exaltation. A divine catapult, so to speak, had been effected as each movement downward had ratcheted the gears tighter

and tighter, so that the final click created an explosive tension. Then the gear was tripped, launching his super-exaltation,

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 9-11)

There is reference here to Isaiah 45. The name given to Jesus was Yahweh, the name that trumps all other titles — the awesome covenant name of the God of Israel — “the name that is above every name.” And one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Messiah is Yahweh to the glory of God the Father!

It was important to Paul that these trajectories of Christ’s humiliation and exaltation recycle through the Philippians’ minds so they would have a fuller understanding of Christ. What we understand of him will determine the way we live.

But there was a more prosaic reason to recall these ravishing trajectories — so the Philippians would walk worthy of the gospel, pursuing unity with one another in humility. Paul was calling them to follow Christ’s humble example and live out Paul’s words: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (vv. 3, 4). Furthermore, in this humble others-first attitude they were to work out their own salvation in the church “with fear and trembling” (v. 12), following the others-directed examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus (cf. vv. 19-30).

CHRIST ALONE (3:1-11)

This paragraph pulses with passion from beginning to end. It begins in verse 2 with a trio of alliterated warnings that effectively slapped Paul’s legalistic detractors with their own conceits. Then in the body of the paragraph (verses 3-9) Paul listed his seven righteous superiorities that left him “blameless” under the Law, only to reject them with an emotional and indelicate expletive. Paul wanted no doubt left that when he, as Saul of Tarsus, experienced the righteousness that comes through the faithfulness of Christ (the righteousness of God that depends on faith), he cast away all his accomplishments and threw himself on Christ alone.

That is why in verses 10, 11 he breathed out his matchless longing: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” For me this is the most inspiring and intimidating prayer in Scripture. Who has the temerity to pray for the

fellowship of Christ's sufferings as Paul did? Only those who 1) know and believe that suffering with and for Christ is the path to deepest intimacy with him, 2) know and believe with Paul that such sufferings are a grace (cf. 1:29), and 3) see also that such sufferings are linked with the joyous power of the resurrection, which provides the strength to endure the sufferings.

This is my greatest personal takeaway from this book and my greatest challenge — to pray daily with all my heart, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10, 11). This was certainly a key longing for those bound together in the fellowship of the gospel.

MORE GEMS FROM PHILIPPIANS

The wonders of this tiny letter continue — for example, the call to press on: “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13, 14) — to die running like Eric Liddell.

The double command to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4) are joy notes fourteen and fifteen on the apostle's sixteen-note carillon. As the Philippians participated in the fellowship of the gospel and in others' sufferings and in the Holy Spirit and in Christ's sufferings and in giving, it was entirely a fellowship of joy.

And by virtue of the Philippians' commitments, the great promises of 4:13, 19 were theirs: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me. . . . And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (v. 19). As the Philippians looked to God, he met their every need with his provision and strength.

FINAL GREETINGS

Even Paul's final greetings, brief as they are, would have brought a smile to the fellowship of the gospel: “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household” (vv. 21, 22). Remember the soldiers guarding Paul? They were handpicked soldiers who received double pay for their services in Rome. And though Paul would have been guarded by only a few of them, the soldiers who were assigned to Paul got the word out. And most certainly these elite troops had access to the household of Caesar.

So it was that some soldiers and cooks and housecleaners and civil servants in Caesar's house had come to Christ. Here John Calvin cuts to the chase: “it is evidence of divine mercy that the Gospel had penetrated that sink

[pit] of all crimes and iniquities.”⁴ Yes! Though both the Philippians and Paul were under Roman oppression, there were brothers and sisters within Caesar’s walls who were on their side and praying for them.

Thus this innocuous final greeting trumpets the grand reality that one day the very seat of imperial power will bow its knee and “confess that Jesus Christ [Messiah] is Lord [Yahweh], to the glory of God the Father” (2:11).

Everything is of God’s grace. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (v. 23).

Amen.⁵

Soli Deo gloria!

Notes

CHAPTER ONE: A PARTICULAR JOY

1. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 24.
2. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 3.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 4.
4. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. Thielman, *Philippians*, p. 18.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 32.
9. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 38.
10. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 39.
11. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 9.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 50.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

CHAPTER TWO: PAUL'S JOYOUS THANKSGIVING

1. Tony Payne, ed., *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (New South Wales, Australia: Matthias Media, 2000), p. 58.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 80.
4. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 42, writes:

It is the intensity of Paul's emotion that accounts for the syntax; it also accounts for the fourfold recurrence of *pas* (in the forms *pase* [two times], *pantote*, and *panton*), for the apparent emphasis on joy (*meta charas*), and for the forcefulness of subsequent expressions (from the first day; being persuaded).
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 38.
8. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 43, writes:

Meyer perceptively emphasizes that the constancy of the Philippians' commitment to the gospel "is the very thing which not only supplies the motive for the apostle's thankfulness, but forms also the ground of his just confidence for the future."

9. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 13.
10. Payne, ed., *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works*, pp. 60, 61.
11. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 85.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 62.
13. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 45.

CHAPTER THREE: PAUL'S JOYFUL AFFECTION

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians: INTERPRETATION*, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 18, mentions the passionate affection of Paul for his people in Romans 9:1-5 as a possible exception. But that is about his passion for his people, the Jews, not a church.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 68, explains:
καρδία is employed in its customary OT sense of the whole person to describe the seat of the physical, spiritual, and mental life. It denotes the center and source of both physical life (Pss. 101:5; 103:15; Acts 14:17) and the whole inner life with its thinking (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:18), feelings or emotions (Rom. 1:24; 9:2; 2 Cor. 2:4, etc.), and volition (2 Cor. 9:7).
3. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 91.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 64.
5. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 92, explains:

There can be little question that the first phrase, "in my chains," refers to Paul's present imprisonment. Here is the first mention of the "suffering" motif, which surfaces throughout this letter, and probably carries more significance than many interpreters are ready to allow. Although "chains" could possibly be a metonymy for imprisonment as such, most likely Paul was literally chained to his guards. The way this similar idea is expressed in 2 Tim 2:9 makes it difficult to imagine anything other than literal chains in that case. Probably the same is true here, since in Roman prisons "imprisonment without chains was a concession to high status." In any case, the repetition of the phrase, "my chains," in vv. 13, 14, and 17 indicates that he is smarting under the imprisonment, in part perhaps because he is not free to roam about.

6. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 69.
7. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), p. 26.

CHAPTER FOUR: PAUL'S PRAYER

1. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 20.
2. *Bengel's New Testament Commentary, Vol. 2: Romans — Revelation*, trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1981), p. 426.
3. F. J. Sheed, *Theology and Sanity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), pp. 9, 10.
4. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 76.
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 67.
6. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 76, 77.
7. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver: Regent, 1992), p. 53.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 68.
9. *Ibid.*

10. Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. 14, explains:
 εἰς, not 'till,' as A.V., but 'for,' 'against,' as those who are preparing for it. For this sense of εἰς, comp. ii. 16; Eph. iv. 30; 2 Tim. i. 12.
11. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 68.
12. See 1 Corinthians 1:7, 8; Colossians 1:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10-12.
13. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 68.
14. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 78. See also Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
16. John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), p. 42.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GOSPEL FIRST!

1. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson, eds., *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox* (NSW, Australia: Lancer Books, 1986), p. 229.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 94.
3. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 23. Carson's pertinent reference to the "Auca five" inspired me to share my personal account.
4. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 99, n. 4.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 79.
7. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 101, explains:
 They recognize that he has been 'set' for that defence by God. χεῖμαί, originally a military term, here indicates that Paul is under orders, issued by God. There is therefore no sense of divine disfavour in his captivity. Quite the reverse. Because he has been divinely appointed for the defence of the gospel, his captivity is entirely understandable. They are not embarrassed or put off by his bonds.
8. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 80.
9. John R. Claypool, *The Preaching Event* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980), p. 68.
10. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 102.
11. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, pp. 25, 26.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 27. Note: Here I have taken Carson's more specific observation based on the experience of Dr. Paul Hiebert and given it general application.
13. Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict: An Insider's Challenging View of Politics, Power, and the Pulpit* (New York: William Morrow and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987); Marvin Olasky, *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992); Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

CHAPTER SIX: PAUL'S JOYOUS CONFIDENCE

1. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 110.
2. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 76, explains:

The word "help" (*epichoregia*) in the NIV rendering of verse 19 can also mean "supply" and is closely related to a Greek verb that means to "furnish, provide, give, grant," and less frequently, "support." Paul used this verb in Galatians 3:5 to speak of God as the one who has "given" his Spirit to the Galatians. It seems likely, then,

that here in Philippians 1:19 the word does not mean the help that the Spirit gives to Paul but the Spirit himself, whom God supplies to Paul. This supply of the Spirit, moreover, is more closely tied to the prayers of the Philippians than the NIV implies. In the Greek text, one definite article stands in front of both “prayers” and “supply” so that the phrase runs, literally, “through the prayer [the term is singular in Greek] of you and supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” Paul is suggesting that the presence of the Spirit will be supplied to Paul through the prayers of the Philippians. In some mysterious way, those prayers are linked with God’s furnishing of the Spirit to him, and together they provide the help he needs to face the Roman tribunal with courage.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 83.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
6. Thielman, *Philippians*, pp. 76, 77.
7. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 32.
8. D. D. Hastings, ed., *The Speaker’s Bible*, Vol. 16 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), p. 37.
9. *Hymns for the Living Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1981), No. 384.
10. Hastings, ed., *The Speaker’s Bible*, Vol. 16, p. 38.
11. Arthur W. Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), p. 110.
12. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), p. 54.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
14. Thielman, *Philippians*, p. 80.

CHAPTER SEVEN: WORTHY CITIZENS

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians*, An Expository Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 100.
2. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 162.
3. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 98.
4. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 157.
5. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 101.
6. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, pp. 164-166, makes four cogent arguments for this referring to the Holy Spirit.
7. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Comrades* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pp. 105, 106.
8. Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 152, 153.
9. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 55.
10. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 89, quoting *The Boston Globe* (July 6, 1994), p. 8.
11. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 158.
12. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 49.
13. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 243.

CHAPTER EIGHT: LIVING WORTHILY IN THE CHURCH

1. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), p. 55.
2. Leslie Flynn, *Great Church Fights* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976), p. 53.
3. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1992), p. 86.
4. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 179, explains:

τὸ ἐ φρονοῦντες (which stands in a chiastic relationship with ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῇτε is to be rendered 'intent on one purpose' and speaks of a life directed towards a single goal. τὸ ἐν describes the one aim on which the readers ought to focus. K. Barth may be right when he claims that 'the concrete details are all hidden from us'. But in the light of : (1) the orientation of both Paul and the proclamation of Christ (vv. 14-18), (2) the suggestion that 'living worthily of the gospel' (1:27) is a comprehensive admonition that stands as a heading to the whole section 1:27-2:18 (styled 'The Situation of the Philippians'), and (3) the subsequent exhortations, it is possible to state what this goal is. τὸ ἐ φρονοῦντες focuses on the need for the members of the congregation to be 'gospel oriented' as they relate to and care for one another.
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 110.
6. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower, A Portrait of the World Before the War 1890-1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 193.
7. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 10.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 110, 111.
9. Marvin R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. xii.
10. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 114.
11. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 60.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 114.

CHAPTER NINE: THE SELF-HUMILIATION OF CHRIST

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 616.
2. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1975), pp. 366, 367.
3. Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve: The Art of Unselfish Living* (Nashville: Word, 1981), pp. 94, 95.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 105.
5. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 115, explains:

Paul says literally, however, "Think this in you," and the words "in you" (*en hymin*) are a common idiom in Greek for "among yourselves." Paul's primary concern, then, is social rather than cerebral: He wants the Philippians to adopt in their mutual relations the same attitude that characterized Jesus.
6. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), p. 73.
7. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 247.
8. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 216.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 217, explains:

The meaning of ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν is defined more precisely in the two participial phrases that follow, namely μορφὴν δούλου λαβών ('taking the form of a slave') and ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος ('being found in human form'). The first three lines of v. 7 (7a, 7b, and 7c) should be taken together. . . . V. 7b and c are formed in a parallel fashion to explicate the main clause in v. 7a (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν), since the two aorist participles λαβών and γενόμενος are coincident with the finite verb ἐκένωσεν and both are modal, describing the manner in which Christ 'emptied himself.'

10. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 134.
11. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 225, 226.
12. J. B. Phillips, *New Testament Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 15.
13. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 227.
14. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 64.
15. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 138.
16. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 231.
17. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 139.
18. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, p. 249.

CHAPTER TEN: CHRIST'S SUPER-EXALTATION

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 160.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 238, explains:

The name (τὸ ὄνομα is definite) greater than any other that God conferred on Jesus as a gracious gift (ἐκαρίσατο) is his own name, κύριος ('Lord'), in its most sublime sense, that designation used in the LXX to represent the personal name of the God of Israel, that is, *Yahweh*. The reasons for interpreting τὸ ὄνομα as κύριος are: (1) in the ἵνα clause of vv. 10-11, which is subordinate to the main clause in v. 9, Jesus is identified with κύριος (Yahweh), the one to whom universal homage is given (Is. 45:23); (2) it is best to regard τῷ Ἰησοῦ and τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα as juxtaposed; (3) for a Jew like Paul the superlative name was 'Yahweh'. Since the phrase in v. 10 can mean 'the name of Jesus' it is best to understand it as referring to the name 'Yahweh'; and (4) κύριος gives a symmetry to the hymn: θεός (2:6) becomes δοῦλος (v. 7) and is exalted to be κύριος (v. 11).

3. *Ibid.*
4. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 120.
5. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 238.
6. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 147.
7. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 251.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ON COMMON SALVATION

1. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 232, 233, n. 14.
2. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 62.
3. Marvin R. O'Connell, *Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1997), p. 154.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 155, 156.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
6. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone* (London: SPCK and John Knox Press, 2004), p. 107.
7. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 248, explains:
 But what suggests evangelism as the ultimate intent of their "holding firm" the gospel is (a) the word order ("*the word of life* holding firm," immediately following "in the world"); (b) the unique language for the gospel, "*word of life*," which occurs only here in Paul, and makes very little sense if it does not carry the thrust of bringing life to others; and (c) the context of Dan 12:3, in which the second line in the Hebrew reads: "and those who bring many to righteousness (shall shine) as the stars for ever and ever." Thus, it is not some kind of defensive posture that is in view (as in, "hold the gospel fast so that the enemy does not take it away from you"), but evangelism, that they clean up their internal act so that they may thereby "hold firm" the gospel.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
9. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 162.
10. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 253.

CHAPTER TWELVE: TIMOTHY: ONE WHO SEEKS OTHERS' INTERESTS

1. Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1942), p. 570.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 318, explains:
 ἰσοψυχος, a rare poetic word that is found nowhere else in the NT and only once in the LXX (Ps. 54:14 [E.T. 55:13]), means 'of like soul or mind.'
3. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 165.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Gail MacDonald, *High Call, High Privilege* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1984), p. 86.
6. Guy H. King, *Joy Way: An Expositional Study of Philippians* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1973), p. 70.
7. Tim Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us," *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1996, Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 29.
8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), p. 99.
9. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 164.
10. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Comrades* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pp. 106, 107.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A MAN TO HONOR

1. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 278, n. 31 records that this is the view of G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1976), 129; F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, NIBC, second edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 96; and Silva [Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament], 161.
2. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1992), pp. 118, 119, gives poignant application of the Vietnam experience.
3. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 276.
4. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 154.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 276, explains:

Epaphroditus thus served as an “apostle,” one sent on behalf of the congregation to perform a given task. That task is then expressed with a metaphor from the sacrificial system: he “performed a priestly duty” on their behalf “for Paul’s needs.”

7. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), p. 113.
8. Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 335.
9. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 279.
10. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 337.
11. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p. 283.
12. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 174, explains:

Once again, those who stake their ambition on the example of Christ in 2.6-11 will find themselves in conflict with the values and presuppositions of the secular path to power. By saying that it is people like Epaphroditus whom the Philippians should hold in honour (*entimous*), Paul at once contradicts Graeco-Roman society’s pervasive culture of rewarding the upwardly mobile quest for prestige and public recognition (*philotimia*). The Church instead will prize and value those who aspire to the mind of Christ.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: REJOICING AND WARNING

1. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 80.
2. Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 348, referencing M. E. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament: Linguistic and Exegetical Studies*, New Testament Tools and Studies, III (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962), p. 28.
3. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 64.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 181. Note the author’s well-reasoned arguments for this view on pp. 180-182.
5. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 2 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 1096.
6. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992, 2005), p. 147, explains:

Hawthorne follows the view that the opponents were non-Christian Jews, but this is highly unlikely, because it has not been characteristic of Jewish people to pressure Gentiles to be circumcised. Moreover, as we shall see, the view that the Philippians’ opponents were Judaizers (Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile Christians submit to the Mosaic law, including circumcision) fits very well the contents of chapter 3 as a whole.

7. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 354.
8. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 93.
9. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 188.
10. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 148.
11. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 357.
12. Silva, *Philippians*, p. 148.
13. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), pp. 118, 119. I have borrowed this expression from the author and expanded on the following quotation:

He is their Divine Obsession, the central concern of a one-track mind and a one-theme tongue. It bespeaks a complete satisfaction in Him, an overmastering

appreciation of what He has done (Gal. 6:14; 1 Cor. 2:2), and an unremitting presentation of Him to the world as worthy of all praise. At the centre of the three characteristics of the people of God there is the One who alone is worthy to be central — for is He not the centre of all heaven (Rev. 5:6)?

14. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 269 defines flesh as follows:

For in the term 'flesh' he includes everything external in man that he could glory in, as will appear from the context: or, to express it briefly, he calls 'flesh' everything that is outside Christ.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: FROM REVELING TO REVULSION

1. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) p. 365, quoting P. Bonnard, *L'Épître de saint Paul aux Philippiens, et l'Épître aux Colossiens*, CNT (Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1950).
2. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 196, referencing K. G. Kuhn, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:359-365.
3. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13:288; 17:42; 18:15.
4. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 374.
5. *Ibid.* explains:

The testimony of the book of Acts to Paul's persecution of the church is not inconsistent with this evidence in his letters (note Gal. 1:23, where Paul cites the report of others about his persecuting activity). Luke himself recounts it (Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2), the resurrected Jesus calls Paul to account for it in his heavenly appearance outside Damascus (9:4-5; 22:7-8; 26:14-15, where δῶκω is used). Ananias speaks of Paul's persecuting activity (9:13-14), as do Jews and Christians who heard Paul preach in the synagogues of Damascus (9:21). Finally, Paul himself mentions it in two of his defense speeches (22:4-5; 26:9-11).

6. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 202.
7. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 380.
8. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, The Prison Letters (London: SPCK Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 118.
9. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 384, 385.
10. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 273.
11. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, pp. 210, 211 and O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 398, 399, argue, as does most recent scholarship, that *dia pisteos Christou* is a subjective genitive.
12. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, pp. 399, 400.
13. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 86.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: PAUL'S DESIRE TO KNOW CHRIST FULLY

1. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 326, 327.
2. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Portland: Multnomah, 1985), p. 26.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 403, explains:

Clearly the apostle intends to explain what is meant by knowing Christ (γινῶναι αὐτόν) through this entire phrase (τῇ δυνάμει τῆς ἀναστάσεως . . . παθημάτων

αὐτοῦ), and while each expression draws attention to separate facets of knowing him (and thus may be isolated in order to clarify their meaning), they are nevertheless to be regarded as a single entity.

See also Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 214.

4. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 404.
5. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 331.
6. James DeForest Murch, *Christian Minister's Manual* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1965), p. 137.
7. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 103, writes:
To know Easter means, for the person knowing it, as stringently as may be: to be implicated in the events of Good Friday — to enter into the form of his death, or whatever may be the translation of the sinister *symmorphizesthai*.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
9. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 410.
10. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 88.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: ONE THING I DO

1. Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 193.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 422, 423.
3. Thielman, *Philippians*, p. 202, n. 17.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 195, n. 3.

The ancient historian Herodotus (ca. 490–425 B.C.) describes a Persian regiment's pursuit of their Greek opponents this way: "The Persian horse, meaning to continue their old harassing tactics, had found the enemy gone from the position they had occupied during the last few days, and had ridden in *pursuit*. Now, *having overtaken* the retreating columns, they renewed their attacks with vigour" (9.58; see Herodotus, *The Histories* [Hammondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1972], 600).

5. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 427.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 429.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 430, 431 explains:

Only the term βραβεῖον is taken directly from the athletic imagery of the games. However, in this context οχοπός clearly describes the finish line of the race on which the athlete intently fixes his gaze, and thus δῶχῳ must be interpreted in the sense of 'run'. οχοπός ('goal, mark') appears only here in the NT, although the cognate verb οχοπέω turns up six times in all, including two instances in Philippians: 2:4; 3:17. The noun refers to that on which one fixes one's gaze, whether it be a target at which an archer may shoot, metaphorically a goal or marker that controls a person's life, or as here the marker at the conclusion of the race upon which the runner fixes his gaze.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 431, n. 64.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 432.
10. In N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, The Prison Letters (London: SPCK Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 122, the author suggests the event and application on which I have elaborated.
11. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 222, explains:

On balance, then, we find underlying this passage a doctrine of both the Spirit and the Church which is remarkably hopeful and robust: Paul trusts the Spirit to

bring the Church to a knowledge of the truth, and to reveal to it the areas where its thinking is 'out of step' (cf. v. 16) with the 'pattern' (v. 17) of life in Christ.

12. *Ibid.*
13. "Eric Liddell," at http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Liddell; August 24, 2006; September 8, 2006.
14. "Eric Liddell," *A Sporting Nation*, BBC; <http://bbc.co.uk/Scotland/sportscotland/asportingnation/?id=0019>, September 14, 2006.
15. "Eric Liddell," http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Liddell.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: STAND FIRM

1. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 364 explains: "Only here does Paul use the compound 'fellow-imitators' . . . most likely Paul is calling on them to join together in imitating him."
2. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1992), p. 145.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 454 explains:
In four short expressions the apostle provides a frightening description of the destiny and character of these enemies. Each of the four statements contains no finite verb. They are intentionally abrupt, even staccato-like, with sharp contrasts between the subjects and predicates of the first three and a clearly implied contrast in the fourth. So the nouns τέλος ('destiny'), θεός ('god'), and δόξα ('glory') are set over against ἀπώλεια ('eternal destruction'), κοιλία ('belly'), and αἰσχύνη ('shame'), while the verb φρονέω, which has previously been used in a positive sense, now has the negative τὰ ἐπίγεια as its object.
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), pp. 230, 231.
5. William F. Buckley Jr., *Nearer, My God* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997), p. 201.
6. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 232.
7. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 458.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 464, explains:
This wonderful transformation, which the Saviour will effect at the *parousia*, is of 'our weak mortal bodies' (GNB): τὸ σῶμα being a collective singular. This noun is employed in a variety of ways in Paul, not only as the instrument of human experience and suffering (2 Cor. 4:10; Gal. 6:17; Phil. 1:20) or the organ of human activity (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 12:1), but also as almost synonymous with the whole personality, in effect designating man as a totality (Rom. 8:23; 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:13-20).
9. Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), p. 121.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: GARRISONED BY PEACE

1. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 258.
2. *Bengel's New Testament Commentary, Vol. 2: Romans — Revelation*, trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1981), p. 445.
3. D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), p. 101.
4. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 241.
5. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 481 explains:
The verb appears also in the middle voice, with the meaning 'take hold of together, assist': at Lk. 5:7 with reference to physical help, and here at Phil. 4:3 of

the assistance Paul's colleague will give to Euodia and Syntyche in reconciling their differences. The use of this verb συλλαμβάνου in Paul's appeal may suggest that the two women were already attempting to overcome their discord.

6. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 243 explains:
Here, Paul employs two fresh sets of crisply memorable imperatives to bring to a point the moral and spiritual message of his letter — quite possibly in deliberate contrast to the factious spirit displayed by Euodia and Syntyche. The first (vv. 4-7) encourages the readers to find the source of their peace and joy in God alone, who in Christ is 'near' and sustains them in every circumstance.
7. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 120.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 59.
9. Emile Cailliet, *Pascal: The Emergence of Genius* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), pp. 131, 132, which quotes from *Mémorial de Pascal, Oeuvres*, v. 12, 3-7 which is quoted here in full:

In the year of Grace, 1654,
On Monday, 23rd of November, Feast of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr, and of others in the Martyrology,
Vigil of Saint Chrysogonus, Martyr, and others,
From about half past ten in the evening until about half past twelve
FIRE
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars.
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
God of Jesus Christ.
Deum meum et Deum vestrum.
"Thy God shall be my God."
Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God.
He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel.
Greatness of the human soul.
"Righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee."
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.
I have separated myself from Him.
Derelinquerunt me fontem aquae vivae.
"My God, wilt Thou leave me?"
Let me not be separated from Him eternally.
"This is eternal life, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and the one whom Thou has sent, Jesus Christ."
Jesus Christ.
Jesus Christ.
I have separated myself from Him: I have fled from Him, denied Him, crucified Him.
Let me never be separated from Him.
We keep hold of Him only by the ways taught in the Gospel.
Renunciation, total and sweet.
Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.
Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on earth.
Non obliviscar sermones tuos. Amen.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
11. Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Let God Love You: A Strikingly Perceptive View of the Christian Life Style As Seen Through Paul's Letter to Philippian Believers* (Nashville: Word Books, 1974), p. 137.

12. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p. 106.
13. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 488.
14. A. W. Tozer, *Born After Midnight* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1959), pp. 119, 120.
15. George Dana Boardman, *The Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1952), pp. 48, 49, who quotes in full from Hildebert of Tours, *Alpha et Omega, Magna Deus!* as translated by Herbert Kenaston.
16. John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), p. 164.
17. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 496.
18. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 248.
19. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 495.

CHAPTER TWENTY: GOOD THOUGHTS

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 255-263.
2. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Pray the Lord My Mind to Keep," *Christianity Today*, August 10, 1998, Vol. 49, No. 9, p. 50.
3. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 250.
4. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 502.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 503.
6. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 251.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
8. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 418.
9. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 504.
10. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 253.
11. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 418.
12. *Ibid.*
13. R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), pp. 51-74.
14. A. T. Robertson, *Paul's Joy in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), p. 242.
15. Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Philippians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1959), p. 228.
16. Earl F. Palmer, *Integrity: A Commentary on the Book of Philippians* (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1992), pp. 114, 115 suggests the application that I have put into my own words.
17. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 512.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: CONTENT IN CHRIST

1. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 431.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 521.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 260.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 427.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
8. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 261.

9. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 292.
10. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 261 explains:
The verb translated learned (pass. *mueô*) originally meant to be inducted into the secret rites of a Hellenistic mystery cult (so also 3 Macc. 2.30); but like other mystery terminology it had come to adopt a transferred and more general meaning, not least in mystical and philosophical discourse (e.g., Philo, *Cher.* 49; *Sacr.* 62; Josephus *C. Ap.* 2.267). Initiation in the metaphorical sense may still be intended, in which case Paul's point is that Christian contentment remains unintelligible to those outside and can only be 'learned' from the God of peace (4.7, 9). Contentment is indeed a quiet secret known and cherished only by the few.
11. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 257.
The preposition ἐν has been taken in an instrumental sense to denote personal agency (= 'through [him who strengthens me]'), but, while this is possible, it is probably better to understand the phrase in an incorporative sense, that is 'in vital union with the one who strengthens me', with the implication that the One who so strengthens Paul is Christ.
Similarly, Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 262, and Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, pp. 434, 435.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ASSURANCES FOR THE GENEROUS

1. William Maxwell, *All the Days and Nights* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1995), p. 274.
2. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 438, n. 7 explains:
Gk. χαλῶς (cf. Acts 10:33), for which the American slang, "you did good," offers a literal, if ungrammatical, "translation." Καλῶς is the adverb of the adjective χαλῶς, which variously means "good, beautiful, pleasant, noble, splendid." The English equivalent "well" would lose too much of the sense of the Greek. The NIV chose to keep the sense of the adverb, but did so at the expense of the verb; "it was good of you" seems a bit bland for the Greek idiom.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 534 explains:
However, in the light of contemporary usage 'the entire phrase, χοινωνεῖν εἰς λόλον δόσεως καὶ λήψεως, is an idiomatic expression indicating friendship'. Marshall concludes his lengthy discussion: 'Paul then is drawing upon familiar notions of friendship to acknowledge the recent gift and to express his gratitude. Rather than pointing to tension or embarrassment on Paul's part over the gift, the language implies the opposite. It reflects a warm and lasting relationship. He not only receives the gift gladly as a sign of their continuing concern, but also recalls the mutual exchange of services and affection which they had shared in the past'.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 538, 539.
5. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 451.
6. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, The Prison Letters (London: SPCK Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 137.
7. Leland Ryken, ed., *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing* (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 2002), p. 351, which quotes from Robert Siegel, *The Well at the World's End: Poetry, Fantasy, and the Limits of the Expressible*.
8. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, p. 453.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 453, n. 16.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 453, 454, n. 16.
Gk. ἐν δόζη, which I take to be locative here (as with the following ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ), not meaning "in heaven" as such (which is rightly objected to by most

scholars), but referring to the ineffable and eternal “glory” in which God dwells, as the context within which God lavishes his riches on his own in Christ Jesus.

11. William W. How, “We Give Thee But Thine Own” (Carol Stream, IL: *Hymns for the Living Church*, 1974), no. 507.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: A FOND FAREWELL

1. See 1:5, *koinōnia*; 1:7, *synkoinōnos*; 2:1, *koinōnia*; 3:10, *koinōnia*; 4:14, *synkoinōneō*; 4:15, *koinōeō*.
2. J. A. Motyer, *Philippian Studies: The Richness of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966) p. 26.
3. Frederick Langbridge, *A Cluster of Quiet Thoughts* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1896).
4. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 295.
5. Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 271 explains:

NA²⁷ and most modern translations end here. There is, however, excellent and widespread early textual support for a concluding Amen (incl. p⁴⁶ Ⲡ A D ψ as well as the Majority text and ancient versions), which is also found in the King James Version. While public reading in liturgical contexts does appear to favour scribal addenda of this kind (cf. the variant readings at the end of most Pauline letters), the manuscript support in this case is exceptionally strong and much of the dissenting evidence less reliable (with the sole exception of *Codex Vaticanus*). If anything, the undisputed earlier use of *amen* in 4.20 makes a later scribal omission here more likely than an insertion. Paul himself can use Amen to conclude his letters (Gal. 6.18; cf. Rom. 16.27) or to lend weight to important theological assertions (e.g. Rom. 1.25; 9.5; 11.36; 15.33; Gal. 1.5; Phil. 4.20; cf. Eph. 3.21). On balance, therefore, we should follow those like O’Brien, Hawthorne and R. P. Martin who take the textual evidence in favour of retaining the word here.

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About the Series

Philippians is part of a Bible commentary series entitled **Preaching the Word**. The series is noted for its unqualified commitment to biblical authority, clear exposition of Scripture, readability, and practical application. Pastor R. Kent Hughes is the general editor for the series, which will eventually encompass every book of the Bible. It is an ideal resource for pastors and teachers, as well as for personal Bible study.

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